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Case Study of the Dundee Academy of Sport Secondary, Further and Higher Education Work (2013-17)

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ABSTRACT

Widening access to Higher Education has been a priority globally in recent years. This has helped shape projects that work with educational establishments in more deprived communities to remove barriers to continued education. One such barrier is often the difficulty that students face in transitioning between educational environments. In Scotland, the Government have made widening access a key initiative and have supported projects that work towards this aim. The Dundee Academy of Sport (DAoS) project was established as a venture between Abertay University and Dundee and Angus College. The project works with schools from an SIMD20 (deprived) background and attempts to remove barriers to Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE). The project works throughout the educational continuum and supports students at each stage of transition. This study focused specifically on the work within secondary schools, FE, HE, as well as the role of DAoS in supporting transition across sectors. Six practitioners from three partner schools, two partner colleges and one lecturer at the university were interviewed to give their evaluation on how DAoS worked with their institution. At secondary level, work with senior pupils was highlighted as being useful in preparing students for FE and HE. Changes in attitude and mind-set for the pupils were noted among those who previously may not have considered continued education. Financial support and skills of DAoS staff were identified as being beneficial to schools. This suggests that a contextualised approach in schools can be useful for engaging pupils. This also suggests that by offering access to FE and HE establishments can make pupils consider these as viable options moving forward. Areas for improvement identified included further embedding of the project into FE and HE courses, further integration of staff, as well as the project being focussed more towards the senior phases of secondary schools.

Keywords: higher education; transition; widening access; further education; secondary education.

Introduction and Background

The Dundee Academy of Sport (DAoS) project was initially created as a partnership project between Abertay University and Dundee and Angus College in 2013. The three aims of the project were:

- To use sport as a vehicle for engaging young people in education at school
- To further develop the region's workforce in the sport and leisure industry
- To ensure seamless transition to both Further and Higher Education in a variety of subjects

The project shares similar aims with the Scottish Attainment Challenge (Scottish Government, 2017) in that it works with schools from the most deprived backgrounds in the local area, with a focus on improving literacy, numeracy and other important skills for pupils (DAoS, 2015). The DAoS project staff use sport as the context for learning to increase engagement in curricular areas and take part in outreach type work for the University. This approach in secondary schools is often very similar to that of an experiential learning environment, which has been shown to increase levels of engagement in school pupils (Beard & Wilson, 2013). This sort of learning environment is also directly applicable to the values of the curriculum set in Scottish schools (Education Scotland, 2006). The areas of Dundee, Angus and Fife, the areas of focus for the project, have some of the highest areas of deprivation in the Scotland (SIMD, 2016). As such, there is a demand for educational and widening access projects such as the DAoS. Given that the DAoS project aims to improve routes towards FE and HE for the socio-economically disadvantaged, this is very much in line with the current Scottish Government recommendations for widening access (Scottish Government, 2016) and addresses a key aspect of the Abertay Strategic Plan (2015) by passing on knowledge and expertise in the surrounding area.

In recent years, there has been an effort in Scotland to widen access to Higher Education in Scotland (Scottish Funding Council, 2016). One of the strategies to achieve this has been to offer direct 'seamless' routes from college to university (Gallacher, 2014). This commonly works by students completing an HNC or HND at college level and then entering into 2nd or 3rd year depending on the course and level of qualification. These students are often referred to as 'Direct Entrants' in the FE and HE sectors (Christie, Barron, & D'Annunzio-Greene, 2013). Abertay University and partner institutions have implemented this strategy for students studying sport as well as other subjects (Abertay University, 2017). Other universities have comparable direct entry routes. This approach has



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increased higher education access for students from poorer backgrounds, notably at more modern universities such as Abertay (Gallacher, 2014; Scottish Funding Council, 2016). A study into similar outreach initiatives from Scull and Cuthill (2010) found that there were similar positive outcomes regarding higher education in Australia. They hypothesised that involving stakeholders and understanding issues surrounding higher education access was critical to achieving these positive outcomes.

Despite the fact that the focus on widening access has increased the numbers of applicants from SIMD20 backgrounds to universities across Scotland (UCAS, 2017), students who transition can face challenges in adapting to their new environment. Universities should consider what support is offered to students in transition (Christie, Barron, & D'Annunzio-Greene, 2013). Schlossberg (1981) proposes that one's ability to adapt to a transition is dependent on a variety of internal and external factors. This is encapsulated in the *Model for Analyzing Human Adaptation to Transition* (Schlossberg, 1981). This model can be applied to any adult transition and has previously been used to shape the support offered to students transitioning into higher education institutions (Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, & Harris, 2011). Therefore, this model will be referred to later on in the study when discussing the transitions into both FE and HE.

Aims of the study

This study aimed to identify the challenges of some partner institutions (secondary schools, colleges and universities) that worked with the DAoS during 2013-17 and to quantify the extent the work of the DAoS influenced engagement and attainment for participants within each partner institution. More specifically, this study aimed to investigate the difficulties perceived in transitioning across the educational continuum and how effective support can be offered in the future.

Method

Participants: Six practitioners agreed to be interviewed. At the time of interview, one participant was a lecturer at the University, one was a course leader at a partner college and another was a lecturer in sport at a partner college. The remaining three of these participants were deputy heads at local secondary schools. Four participants were female, two were male and all had been in post for a number of years (range 2.5-17yrs). Written and verbal consent was obtained from each participant prior to interview. The researcher had relevant PVG scheme membership to work with schools, pupils and teachers in the area in accordance with government guidelines (Scottish Government, 2011). Participant, ages and institution names were not disclosed in order to protect their identity.

- RR: Lecturer, University (Female)
- MM: Course Leader, Partner College (Male)
- AA: Lecturer, Partner College (Male)
- RZ: Depute Head, Local Secondary School (Female)
- VV: Deputy Head, Secondary School outside of Dundee (Female)
- LL: Deputy Head, Local Secondary School (Female)

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted in schools by a project assistant/teaching fellow of the Dundee Academy of Sport. The topics being covered fell under the following categories:

- Challenges faced by their institution
- Strategies to manage these difficulties
- Ideas and suggestions for the future

The researcher had prior experience in this area. Each interview was around 15 minutes long and were all recorded with a Zoom H1 audio recorder. The audio recorder produced audio files that were transferred to the researcher's computer for analysis.

Analysis: Following the interview stage, the recordings were transcribed into Microsoft Word format. Different fonts were used to differentiate when each person was talking during the interview. Copies of transcriptions are available by emailing j.glen@abertay.ac.uk. These transcriptions were analysed, going through a process of open and selective coding by hand using highlighter pens. These were then developed into themes. Open coding allowed broad themes to be initially developed, whilst the selective coding allowed the data to become more rich, specific and suitable for thematic analysis. Upon transcription of the interviews, the audio recording files were deleted in order to protect identities of the participants.



Results

Challenges faced by institution

Socio-economic challenges: All participants interviewed alluded to obstacles they faced as part of their job. Secondary school teachers highlighted the finances of their school and the poverty facing some of their pupils as a major challenge in their school. This is expected, given the SIMD profile of the surrounding area of the University, colleges and schools that the Dundee Academy of Sport work with. This is explained by participants at secondary and FE level:

“Probably our biggest issue is that we have over 60% of our pupils from SIMD 1 & 2.” (RZ)

“3 in 5 children are in poverty in the area, that’s crazy. If I have a class of 20, 12 of them are in poverty.” (AA)

This is also backed up by Deputy Head teachers at other secondary schools, as well as college staff, who explain the link between poverty, attendance and engagement in school curriculum:

“that (SIMD status) makes a difference to how children perform in school, how engaged they are, how much they attend school and also how well they do in their subjects.” (VV)

“One of the biggest challenges that we face is about attendance. Getting the young people to come into school and engage with school on 5 days a week.” (LL)

“Our students haven’t perhaps reached their full potential before leaving school.” (MM)

Lack of ambition of pupils as well as limited access to FE/HE were also common challenges faced by the teachers interviewed, as shown below:

“it was surprising to me how little the youngsters think about the world beyond even the area that they are in. So you know Dundee is seen as some huge metropolis.” (VV)

“we have higher aspirations for them than they do have for themselves.” (LL)

Skill and ability level: Some significant issues highlighted by teachers included transport, lack of specialist skills, drug and alcohol abuse of parents, wider parental issues and societal issues. At FE level, some of these challenges continued after the transition:

“we struggle with writing skills, particularly at the younger ages when they come in.” (AA)

Although measures were put in place at FE level to help students improve these skills, the students who went onto HE still showed signs of being behind at the start of transition to FE according to the university lecturer:

“Key skills such as referencing, finding academic sources, peer reviewed journals they tend to struggle with... they should be at the same level as our existing 2nd years, but they’re just not.” (RR)

Logistical and staffing challenges: Whilst this participant empathised with the direct entrants, they also highlighted time constraints for existing university staff as a limitation in trying to address the issue:

“Quite frankly, at 3rd year level as academic staff, we don’t have the time to cover these key skills with students.” (RR)

This viewpoint is understandable, but lends further support to the view that extensive, time-consuming support needs to be offered in order to help the students adapt to the transition from FE to HE. The participants at each stage also discussed potential challenges that may arise if the project were to cease:

“I mean, where on earth would they get these opportunities? They can’t afford even to get on the bus to go into town.” (LL)

“we couldn’t do many of the things we do now, without your support.” (RZ)

Aside from the financial implications discussed by the participating teachers, another potential implication highlighted was that there would be a lack of expertise and time to enable the teaching staff to provide lessons in the same way as the DAoS staff currently do:

“We wouldn’t have the staffing to run the HWB day for example, we couldn’t get them there in the first place. It will have a major impact.” (RZ)

“It would impact on staff, they would have to give more time and energy to it as well. That is a shame when we’ve got a real partnership that is working well.” (VV)

One other significant potential implication, discussed by the secondary teachers mainly, is the effect that removal of DAoS support would have on senior phase pupils who are looking towards continued education or employment opportunities:

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“it’s about beyond PE and beyond Higher, it’s about what the youngsters do when they leave school, and we need people to help us tell that message and keep reinforcing it.” (VV)

“I would hate to lose it, I really would.... If DAoS wasn’t available, it’s that stepping stone making that link between the school and the university.” (LL)

Lack of support: Other less common impacts of removal of DAoS support highlighted by the teachers were; lack of transition help, logistical issues, lack of resources and lack of CPD for teachers. At FE level the following views were expressed:

“I know we’d be able to function because we’ve done so in the past. The disadvantage is, the input of the staff coming in and supporting the students. That for me is going to be the big loss.” (MM)

“in terms of students completing the college course, not much (impact). But in terms of taking the students from college to university I think the students will suffer quite badly.” (AA)

From this it is suggested that FE delivery would be able to function almost as normal. However, the access to HE and support when the students arrive would be significantly negatively affected. The view of the HE participant was more dramatic:

“It’s going to create a massive hole for the students and for the staff, it is a worry.” (RR)

“great shame that all this work has been done to increase the number of students coming to University and it’s just going to be dropped. My worry is there’s not going to be a phasing out process either... it’s going to have a massive impact.” (RR)

This suggests that other resources will need to be diverted into the area should the project cease to exist. The participant above also noted that the DAoS staff have covered a number of tutorials and lectures at university level for years.

Strategies to manage these difficulties:

Financial: Secondary teachers interviewed did say that the resources, financial help and transport flexibility that the DAoS has project offered was helpful in addressing the challenges that they face:

“it’s been invaluable is because it provides and helps us to provide the extras that pupils couldn’t afford.” (RZ)

“the funding has enabled us to do some of the things that we would have never been able to afford ourselves.” (LL)

As of start of term for 2017-18, the school will be receiving pupil equity fund (PEF) money, which should enable them to fund some of these ventures themselves. Therefore, DAoS funding for schools may not be of great importance moving forward.

Another area of help identified by all the teachers interviewed was the increased levels of engagement from pupils. This was apparent at both primary and secondary level:

“it was really good seeing some, some of the real likely lads who hardly ever come to the school but they really hooked in that it was a sports person speaking in French to them.” (LL)

With regard to FE and HE, the three secondary school teachers interviewed highlighted the significance of the impact of the DAoS work on their pupils. The FE staff also highlighted the significance in this area:

“this year we have the highest number of students ever applying for third level, for college. We put a lot of that success down to the fact that they’ve had extra intervention throughout their career. We’ve been working with DAoS for 4 years.” (RZ)

“that’s been hugely helpful to add in to that message that you can be a master of your own destiny, that ordinary people go to university. It’s breaking down barriers and I think that’s the main thing that the academy of sport has done for us.” (VV)

“it was good to get them into good study habits, to make them realise, why couldn’t they go to university if that’s what they want?” (LL)

“If they do come here, and they see you, it’s that little bit more relaxed.” (AA)

“When we first started, the number of students articulating was probably between 30-40% and now it’s around 80%. Certainly that increase, the academy’s role has been incredibly beneficial.” (MM)

Changing attitudes to continued education: The quotes from participants above hint at a change in attitudes towards FE and HE from secondary pupils and college students. Above are also successes of application numbers revealed by RZ (secondary) and MM (college) that they attribute in part to the support received.



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All the participants at secondary and FE level interviewed also expanded upon why they believed that attitudes towards continued education changed. They all highlighted the significance of pupils and students being able to visit campuses as being of great help. Below are examples of such statements:

“the visits outwith school have had a real impact. The main thing is just allowing them access to that world. They have seen what it’s about and that allows them to consider that it could be something they have access to.” (VV)

“They (6th years) were saying that the possibilities now seem an awful lot wider to them, they know the range of choices now. They’ve been down to Abertay, they’ve had tutorials, they’ve had lectures. In the past they wouldn’t have had that... it gives them confidence they can work within the system. That’s why it’s invaluable.” (RZ)

“it’s also good for them to be going to the likes of Abertay University just to be doing something on site, rather than being in the school.” (LL)

“Being able to access some of the areas of the university that previously we have been unable to access, such as the library... it’s crucial to their experience.” (MM)

Experiences and opportunities to learn new information and skills were also highlighted as helping to overcome challenges:

“Totally out of their comfort zone, doing canoeing and gorge walking. That was absolutely brilliant, and that will be something they never forget in their school career.” (LL)

“it’s important for them to have different takes on things and see what a specialist has to offer.” (AA)

Increasing skills of staff and students: Other areas highlighted by the participants as being beneficial were; CPD for staff, expertise of staff, dealing with time constraints of teachers and removing barriers to continued education. Regarding FE to HE transition, there were benefits seen by staff at FE and HE level. These views considered both the support offered prior to and during the transition:

“you’ve come in a few times and worked on literacy and ability to reference and stuff like that... with good success.” (AA)

“A number of the sessions you have run have given the students that added insight, especially for those looking to go onto university study.” (MM)

“you have support sessions for the direct entrant students, which helped them with the key skills they need.” (RR)

“That support they get, particularly in that first semester enables a lot of them to stay in University, because without that I think a lot of them would leave.” (RR)

The views above highlight that there is indeed a skills gap between FE and HE and that support across all stages of the transition has been beneficial to students and retention rates at the University.

Ideas and suggestions for the future

Planning and evaluation: All secondary teachers interviewed expressed a desire to continue working with the DAoS and two offered suggestions about how the project can work more effectively with their institution in the future. One teacher interviewed (RZ) could not elaborate on any possible improvements but was open to any suggestions moving forward and was eager to continue working with DAoS if the project were to be continued. The other teachers interviewed expressed that they thought the combined planning of lessons between the school and DAoS could be improved:

“I think maybe a bit more structure. Sometimes we need to have a more structured approach to what our priorities are.” (LL)

Another key area where the teachers felt there was room for improvement was the evaluation of the work conducted by DAoS staff in schools:

“We could look more at what is planned next and how we are evaluating it. I have said already that we’ve not been as good at doing the evaluation.” (VV)

“What is going to be the impact? Which of the groups do we home in on?”. (LL)

Another suggestion was to tailor the DAoS work to specific age and ability groups:

“Improve it so it is universal, to get the whole school through something like this.” (LL)

Integration: Across FE and HE levels the view from all three relevant participants was that the DAoS should be integrated with more visibility:

“more integration... get it embedded from the beginning, sometimes it takes longer for the students to see the benefits.” (AA)

“We could do our meetings a turnabout, that way we would become more comfortable with one another’s work place.” (MM)



"It would be nice at some point, if we integrated a bit more. The obvious thing for me would be a joint office space. That way we talk to each other all of the time." (RR)

From this it is clear that there is a desire to continue the work of the project, but that improved communication and visibility of staff would be preferred. One participant at FE level highlighted a political problem between FE and HE institutions that could be dealt with:

"my manager didn't want you to work with the HNCs, as it would have meant that they may not stay on for an HND. The college would lose money if the students left and went straight to uni." (AA)

This is a significant concern as it shows that another barrier is being put in place of students for personal gain. Alternatively, this could be down to the aims of the project being miscommunicated with the FE establishment. At another FE institution the participant suggested that the project should move away from trying to increase articulation numbers due to a perceived threshold being reached:

"We now have the maximum number of students who are going to articulate. You can't really increase that much." (MM)

"there needs to be a reshaping. If the primary goal was to increase articulation, then that's been achieved." (MM)

These are valid viewpoints, as not all students will desire to move from FE to HE even if all barriers were removed. However, there were few specific suggestions offered as to what this re-shaping would look like.

Narrowed focus: At HE level, the participant suggested that the DAoS should re-focus on upper secondary school work as well FE to HE transition:

"For me it's the primary school stuff that is probably quite problematic. I think if the DAoS does continue, then it should focus on college students and secondary schools." (RR)

"The amount that gets done could probably be restricted, with more of a focus on the transition between college and university." (RR)

This was a common theme throughout this particular interview and is understandable given the participant's role in HE.

Discussion

From the interviews, it is clear that the secondary schools, partner colleges and the University have many challenges to contend with on a daily basis. At school level, some of these are financial, but the common themes were behavioural and engagement issues, lack of expertise and a disinterested attitude towards FE and HE from pupils. The teachers interviewed highlighted ways in which the Dundee Academy of Sport has helped to tackle these issues.

At secondary school level, increased engagement was noted, but the most apparent theme highlighted by the participants was the increased accessibility to FE and HE. This work with schools is in line with the Scottish Government (2016) recommendations 4, 15, 16 and 18 surrounding engagement with wider communities, those of socially disadvantaged backgrounds and improving levels of attainment. It is possible to hypothesise that the underlying reasons for increased engagement were that the DAoS staff had more time to research the topic and they delivered the class in a different style to the classroom teacher. Another factor that should not be overlooked is that DAoS staff delivered the classes. This may have accounted for some of the increased engagement due to lower levels of formality and familiarity with the pupils. Specific areas of expertise within the DAoS team were also identified as being beneficial for helping to deliver quality lessons with increased engagement. As the project progresses into school year 2017-18 the staff numbers have decreased and, as a result, the breadth of expertise has been narrowed. This may have an impact on the number of lessons, however it remains to be seen what level of impact this will have. The secondary school teachers interviewed also discussed the importance of familiarising the students within both FE and HE settings. This normally took place through DAoS organised school trips to visit the University and College campuses. The participants discussed how they felt that these visits removed some of the barriers to education that pupils had previously encountered. The visits to the campuses help provide a recognition of a physical setting prior to moving to FE or HE, which is a factor in helping an individual adapt to a transition (Schlossberg, 1981). A change of attitudes from the pupils was identified and, in the case of one school, FE and HE applications reached a record high. The role of DAoS in widening access was found to be crucial, due to lessons being delivered in a similar way as the pupils would receive in a FE or HE setting. These findings are very much in line with the Abertay Strategic Plan (2015) which outlines the significance of engaging with the wider community and increasing access to education. The DAoS staff also supported much of the transition work affecting primary and secondary schools. This can involve dealing with upwards of 200 primary seven pupils for larger secondary clusters, the participants interviewed expressed gratitude for that support as the logistics, and other considerations for such events can be significant. With the project staff at a lesser number than before, consideration will need to be given as to how to deal with larger groups such as this. This is not to say it should not happen, but the approach to delivery would need to be substantially altered.

At FE level itself, the work of the DAoS is not considered essential, which is most likely why a continuation of the project is in doubt moving forward. Colleges will still be able to function, however the lecturer and course leader interviewed at FE both stated that the work of the DAoS is hugely beneficial for helping the transition and articulation of college students towards university. If the DAoS

project ceases to exist, other measures would need to be created and developed in order to retain the effective transition and articulation at present. This would come at a cost to the University and/or FE institutions. Alternatively, staff could be reassigned where appropriate to provide support. Either proposed measure would likely take some time to implement, meaning that certain students may not benefit from this measure being put in place. At FE level, staff also talked about 'embedding' the DAoS project more throughout the academic year to get a further benefit and improve familiarity with the students.

At HE level, the lecturer interviewed discussed the importance of the DAoS in improving the skills of the direct entrant students. The lecturer interviewed perceived that the students who transition to HE have lower academic skills when they arrive than other students who have taken the more traditional route. This view has been seen in similar situations (Ryan et al, 2011; Christie, Barron, & D'Annunzio-Green, 2013). The lecturer interviewed believed that the support offered by DAoS helped the students be retained by the University. This links into Schlossberg's (1981) model, which suggests that in order to achieve 'adaptation' to a new situation there is a dependence on an individual's resources and deficits. The academic support offered by the DAoS, it could be argued, has served to enhance the resources (eg. academic skill) at the students' disposal and help them adapt to the transition. Whatever happens to the DAoS project in the future, in order to help the University retain students similar support should be offered. Without support for those who have transitioned to HE, there is an increased likelihood that they will not be able to fully adapt.

Whilst the work of the DAoS was valued, there were some ideas put forward by participants to improve current provision. The majority of these suggestions at secondary level specified improved planning and evaluation of any partnership work. This is challenging as the timetables of the schools and the university are independent of one another and would need to be considered prior to the 2017-18 delivery. Evaluation of work currently takes the form of primarily quantitative surveys, however measuring attainment and gathering qualitative information may provide the project with richer data moving forward. At FE level, improvements suggested by the participants focused on the support being more embedded into their curriculum. This seems a valid suggestion and one that could be acted upon simply with more effective planning and communication across institutions. It would also help provide recognisable faces for students if they do transition to FE and reduce a degree of stress due to increased confidence in skills. These may seem trivial matters, however, Schlossberg (1981) suggests they are both factors that can affect how well one adapts to a transition.

Conclusion

Upon interviewing the participants, it is clear that the support offered by the DAoS to schools has been well received. To date this support has had a positive impact on pupils at secondary school level. The DAoS partnership work with schools to date is in line with the targets and recommendations set by the Scottish Government with regard to increasing attainment and widening access to FE and HE. Therefore, it is going to be beneficial to the schools that the DAoS project will continue working with these groups for 2017-18. Indeed, the implications of the DAoS project ceasing to exist were highlighted by some participants as having a significantly negative effect on their institution. Consideration will need to be given as to how the DAoS project works with larger groups (such as primary seven transition events), as the number of staff will decrease significantly. This is due to the DAoS staffing being reduced and the extra financial flexibility certain schools may have because of the Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) that affects the 2017-18 school year. It was suggested by one participant that the DAoS further prioritise delivery at upper secondary, FE and HE levels. This may allow resources to be diverted towards the students in transition but does not widen access to students below this age bracket. It is recommended that the DAoS team and the schools work together to plan more coherently and evaluate the impact of the partnership work in more depth. At FE and HE level the DAoS project should continue to support students with regular campus visits and academic skills classes in order to increase the chance of direct entrant students adapting to the transition. It was suggested that increasing the visibility of DAoS staff at FE and HE level would be of benefit. This may help the students in transition as it gives them the social support that can be vital in adapting to a transition. If the project ceases to exist in the future, the FE and HE institutions should consider how support is offered to students in transition and learn from the perceived and tangible successes of the work carried out in schools, FE and HE institutions.

Biography

Jonathan Glen is a Teaching Fellow at Abertay University. He holds an MSc in Sports Coaching and a BA (Hons) in Psychology and Sports Studies from the University of Stirling. He is also a qualified member of the Higher Education Academy (HEA).

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