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Higher Expectations – Meeting our Students’ Expectations of Teaching

**Why ‘fun’ is not enough: exploring effective transition into Higher Education**

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**Background**

This short paper addresses two themes - expectations and engagement - drawing upon evidence from the Young Persons’ Attributes Programme, a recent Faculty of Health and Wellbeing (HWB) initiative, which was done in collaboration with various Local Authorities and regional NHS employers. The programme aimed to raise the expectations and awareness of Level 3 young learners who were taking non-A Level routes into Higher Education or the workplace. Given the local / regional flavour, the initiative draws upon the work of Dyson and Kerr (2011) who advocate that: *initiatives which are able to engage with complex local dynamics have an important role to play in tackling links between education, disadvantage and place* (p6) and also on a study by St Clair, Kintrea and Houston (2011) commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation which suggests that there are far too many crude assumptions made about certain communities and overall levels of educational aspiration.

**The Young Attributes Programme**

Following a series of successful Summer Schools, the intention was to create an enduring community of practice involving partners within the South Yorkshire region interested in 16-18 years’ education and committed to providing sustainable opportunities for level 3, non-A level route students progressing into Higher Education or the workplace. Prior to this scheme, the regional Aim Higher network had achieved some success in increasing the uptake of young people from diverse backgrounds applying for and entering Higher Education in South Yorkshire, resulting in a 6% increase from 2004 to 2009 of those aged 19 and under from the 40 most deprived neighbourhoods, admitted to University. With the curtailment of Aim Higher, the Young Persons’ Attributes initiative intended to build from these origins. The Health and Wellbeing Faculty brought together employers, colleges, Local Authorities and the University of Sheffield to design and deliver a Young Persons’ Attributes Programme to enhance young learners’ skills and experiences in:

* Gaining insight into the skills, qualities and competencies that employers and Higher Education require.
* Helping to understand the importance of on-going professional behaviours.
* Recognising the importance of taking responsibility for own actions.
* The importance of using initiative.

The Young Persons’ Attributes Programme was piloted in 2011/12 with 2 cohorts, comprising 71 learners, who accessed a series of 4 sessions: some were employer led, others facilitated by college staff and the remainder by University staff and/or students. All sessions related to Level 3 study on courses being taken already by learners in Health and Care; hence, the Programme aimed to enhance their current learning, aligning with Watson's assertions (2006) that the most productive form of widening participation gets learners to the matriculation starting point; especially relevant for Higher Education entry.

The programme (Appendix 1) also included the experiencing of a Higher Education-style lecture and the subsequent assignment was designed to give an introduction to expectations of a Higher Education level of study. Learners were given marks and diagnostic feedback to help them assess current attainment levels and in order to consider opportunities for further self-enhancement. College staffs have reported enhanced grade performance from Programme participants’ alongside noticeable improvements in confidence, although both of these claims need to be evaluated over a much longer-term period. The Attributes Programme placed the young learner at the centre of the initiative and the Graffiti Wall (Appendix 2) contains comments from learners at end of the final session. Initial indications are that the majority of participants have already found some aspects of the Programme valuable.

There were some distinctive features of the programme, comprising:

* There was a focus on the reality of Higher Education and the workplace and this was accepted as being part of the overarching ethos of the Programme. (Consequently, refreshments and lunches for sessions were not provided and start and finish times reflected those expected within both workplaces and University).
* Learners were split across school / college groups from the outset to give experience of working with people they did not know, thus reflecting the reality of being in a different environment and in developing effective team working skills.
* Learners had opportunity to complete a Higher Education level mini-assignment and to gain diagnostic feedback to enhance their future progression.
* The project consisted of 4 increasingly-challenging sessions with content defined by all stakeholders, not just by University representatives.
* Success breeds success: the Programme is now being extended into a 2-year process to incorporate shared staff development opportunities to enhance continuous improvement.

Stakeholders agreed to pilot the Programme as a way of giving learners the opportunity to experience *going the extra mile.* The intention was to provide a lived experience that improved chances of a positive first year Higher Education experience. By doing this programme, the young learners will have gained:

* Experience of Higher Education lectures and workshops.
* Skills in writing a Higher Education assignment and in receiving feedback.
* Understanding of the importance of professional practice in both the workplace and Higher Education.
* Appreciation of the significance of effective communication with employers and Higher Education Institutions.

**Some ‘Wicked Issues’ along the Way**

1. It became apparent early on in the delivery of the Programme that many of these young learners were not well prepared – or equipped – to engage in anything other than immensely superficial activities. Learners tended to categorise activities as ‘fun’ or otherwise and, as this was the key arbiter of quality from their perspective, soon disengaged if pushed beyond being entertained.
2. Recent policy initiatives – such as those advocated within the Wolf Report (2011) and supported by Michael Gove (Secretary of State for Education) appear to be furthering the schism between vocational and academic learning; hence, the 14 – 19 curriculum is becoming more controlled and – arguably – more risk averse, leading colleges and young learners to engage only into that which guarantees certain outcomes. We advocate that for learners identified as undertaking vocational and / or applied academic routes, this will render them even more disadvantaged if trying to access Higher Education.
3. The Young Persons’ Attributes Programme has signalled some good early indicators yet there is considerable evidence (St Clair, Kintrea, and Houston, 2011; Goodman and Gregg, 2010) to support the view that really effective transition into Higher Education starts off much earlier – at primary school age – in order for those from disadvantaged communities to gain a sense of entitlement and ownership, let alone the realisation of becoming a Critical Being as advocated by Barnett (1997) as the goal of effective education in which thinking, self-reflection and action are developed as a lifelong process: *Critical persons are more than just critical thinkers. They are able critically to engage with the world and with themselves as well as with knowledge* (p1).

**Enlisting your Help?**

This experience raises several issues for exploration within this workshop. We would like you to share your ideas, concerning the following questions:

* Are we preparing in-coming students with the right skills, attitudes and understandings, in order to have the best opportunities for their future?
* Does the pressure placed on Colleges and Schools to meet targets for course pass rates mean that they are unable to use supposedly 'riskier' teaching methods to develop students' thinking abilities; hence disadvantaging their students in the longer-term?
* What can be done constructively to address these gaps?
* How many of these issues should be the business of Higher Education?

Many thanks for your participation today. For any further details and to engage in further dialogue about these issues or to share ideas, please contact:

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**References**

Barnett*,* R*. (*1997*) Higher Education: A Critical Business.* Buckingham: SRHE/Open University Press.

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Goodman. A. and Gregg, P. (2010) *Poorer children’s educational attainment: how important are attitudes and behaviour?* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

St Clair, R., Kintrea, K. and Houston, M. (2011) *The influence of parents, places and poverty on educational attitudes and aspirations.* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

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**Appendix 1: Content Details of the Young Attributes Programme**

The project consisted of 4 increasingly challenging sessions which took place between July 2011 and March 2012. The Steering Group met on a bi-monthly basis to define the content of the sessions. There were suggestions made for sessions to include mock interviews and how to write personal statements but these were already offered widely across the participating schools and colleges; hence, it was important that this project did not replicate existing practice but had innovative sessions to challenge the students, thus enhancing their future opportunities.

**Session Content**

The four sessions comprised:

**Session One**

A half day session devised and run by staff from Sheffield Teaching Hospitals involving the students in 3 scenarios from the workplace.

**Session Two**

A full day session where students were given the role of University Admissions Tutors to help them understand the process of short-listing, interviewing and decision making.

**Session Three**

A half day session which included a lecture on oppression and incorporated the setting of a 1,000 word assignment with specified dates for hand in and feedback, thus mirroring a university experience.

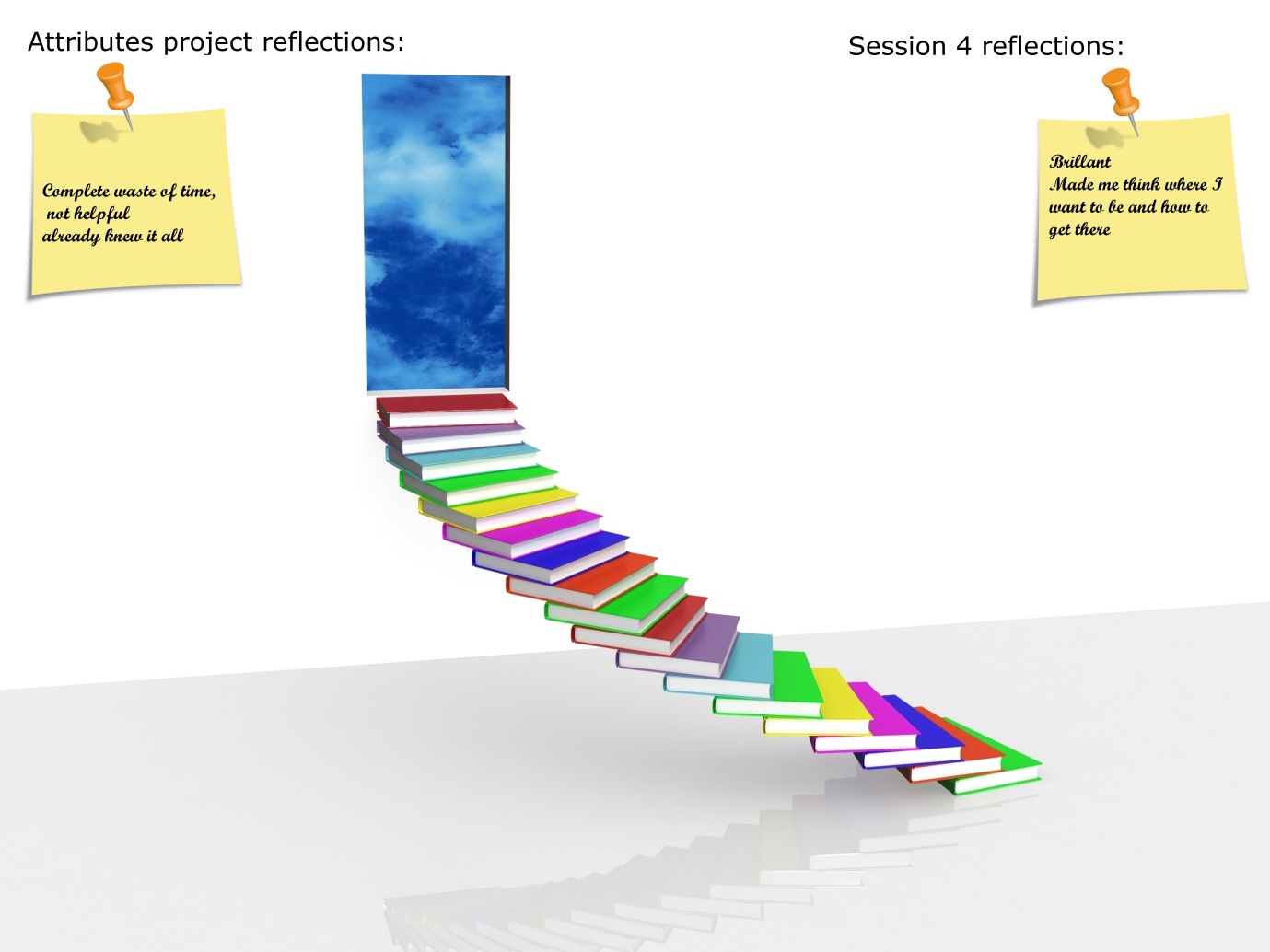
**Session Four**

A full day session where students worked in mixed groups to explore their own progression strategies, comprising what they wanted to do in light of the Attributes experience and how they could now go about achieving their ambitions. For the first half of the day they worked in groups to play the ‘So What Snakes and Ladders’ decision-making game. This was snakes and ladders with a difference as participants had to negotiate with all group members and gain consensus about how the game was to be played. Each participant then had a timed 2 minutes slot in which to respond to various prompt cards about their progression. Within the allotted 2 minutes they had to convince others within the group of the efficacy of their idea and then received either a reward or penalty imposed by the rest of the group re the quality of their stated idea. The prompt cards ensured that all students had to take an active part in the game. This was followed by an interactive presentation from Sheffield Teaching Hospitals which considered the importance of English and Mathematics in the workplace. The afternoon involved further group work, thinking about the skills and attributes that each learner identified that they already acquired / enhanced and what they needed to gain to provide the best possible opportunities for their future.

**Appendix 2: Attributes Project - Graffiti Wall Learner Feedback**

The background of the graffiti wall for this feedback is shown below. Two example post-it notes detailing negative and positive comments are provided on the feedback wall as exemplar prompts. Learners were then invited to leave up to 6 post-it note electronic comments. This was done individually initially to avoid peer influence and to minimise bias; however, learners were so enamoured by the process that this took much longer than originally envisaged and it was decided to organise learners into small groups to ensure timely use of this innovative feedback mechanism.

**Blank Graffiti Wall**



The following sheet contains a couple of Graffiti Wall examples detailing the feedback of two small groups of learners.



