

Are We Delivering What Students Want And Need To Succeed?

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At the Drama and Performance Studies exam board in June 2009, the department was concerned that a small number of students were often failing to submit written assignments on more than one course. In a climate where retention is essential, it was important to establish that appropriate support was being given to all our students.

The Sunday Times cites Worcester University (with one other institution) as the university *“most likely to accept alternative qualifications.”* (Grimston 2010) The data of results on entry of 67 first year Drama students in 2010, showed 43 had “A” level qualifications compared to 24 with a range of other qualifications including, those with vocational qualifications, foreign and mature students.

The research aimed to establish if there were differences in the expectations and achievements of “A” level students and students with vocational (alternative) qualifications after one year at The University of Worcester studying Drama and Performance Studies. With the teaching and learning experience of students as a focus, three related areas were explored:

- The transition between college or school and university.
- Support by university teaching staff.
- Academic demands and challenges.

Achievement was measured by comparing the results of practical and written elements by “A” level and vocational students on the three mandatory modules that all first year students take. A focus group representing a cross section of educational backgrounds was convened to explore initial expectations and whether these changed throughout the year. Questionnaires were distributed to all students and used to compare aspects raised in focus group discussions, to see if they were upheld in the larger cohort.

Interim findings for achievement were based on the results of “Bodies, Voices and Spaces” (DRAM1101) and “Text and Context” (DRAM 1102). DRAM 1101 is heavily weighted on devised practical elements and the writing style is informal, reflecting on student’s own practice compared to DRAM1102, with a more formal essay and text based practical. Results revealed:

- “A” level students achieved more highly on written elements of courses than vocational students.
- There was very little statistical difference in their practical results.
- The marks overall were considerably better for DRAM 1101 than DRAM1102 suggesting the style of the course was a significant factor.

Evidence from focus group discussions and questionnaires showed there were not major differences in the expectations of “A” level students and vocational students, but shared perceptions showed they expected to:

- Struggle more with written work
- Have a strong practical underpinning to their course
- Have quite high levels of tutor input

Students gave very positive feedback about their initial expectations being met, the challenging nature of courses and the availability and willingness of tutors to help.

In order to establish that appropriate support is given to all students future strategies could be considered:

- The adoption of a flexible approach to written work as it does not suit the needs of all students to be assessed in less formal ways.
- Maximise the contact time tutors have with groups and individual students as this seems to have a beneficial effect on student’s perception of their progress.
- Make sure all courses adhere to *“an emphasis on experiential learning through practice”* stated in the prospectus and recognised and eloquently expressed by one student who stated; *“I looked through 48 universities and I chose this one because of the amount of practical work there was overall. There are so many factors, but this was the one deciding factor because you learn the theory through the practical and I think it is really important the university keeps this approach.”* (Focus group transcript 2010).

References

- Grimston, J. (Sunday 4th April 2010) Under half of degree students have A-levels. *The Sunday Times*
Focus group discussion transcript (16th February 2010)