Supporting student to thrive in their transition to university by enhancing the curricula with our head, hand and heart

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> "Today I'm gonna talk a bit about the jump from school to university. I call it a jump because that's exactly how it feels. Like a leap. With your eyes shut. Off a cliff. At night. Into shark infested waters. At least that's how it felt for me the first time." (Second year student on their experience of starting university Devis-Rozental and Barron 2020, p.83)

For any educator to read this student's lived experience is hard. Indeed, most of us work in education because we want to make a difference and to change lives for the better and knowing that any of our students can feel like this at any point is not something we would want. Still, it happens.

This paper argues that the transition from school environments, with an emphasis on results from examinations does not prepare students well for the self-directed type of learning required at university in the UK (Murtagh 2010). It proposes three ways in which schools can support students in preparing better making a call to action for educators to practice with an embodied relational understanding (Todres et al 2009), and continue inspiring, enthusing and supporting their students to flourish and thrive as they leave their classroom and enter the next part of their journey.

Embodied relational understanding is a way of knowing that is holistically contextual" (Galvin and Todres 2013, p. 148). By this, they mean practising with our head (knowledge), hand (how we do things) and heart (our emotions and social interactions) as areas interrelated and inseparable (Devis-Rozental 2018). Using what we know about our subject and our lived experience to inform the way we do things, in a sense using what Aristotle called practical wisdom, by gauging the right approach to a given situation. And doing this with compassion, care, kindness and consideration. It means seeing students as peers in the learning journey and knowing that the way in which we interact with them will influence their sense of self, confidence and belief in their abilities (Devis-Rozental and Farquharson 2020).

The transition from school to university is a challenging time for students. During this change of space and place, students arriving to university may feel like strangers in an unknown culture where norms, customs and routines are different and the familiar may be far away (Todres et al. 2009). According to Meehan and Howells (2018), students describe the experience of starting higher education as a period where they feel lost or lack a sense of belonging. This can be evidenced by the unprecedented numbers of students that in recent years have arrived at university suffering from anxiety and other types of mental health issues which can sometimes be exacerbated or triggered due to their unpreparedness for this transition (Lowe and Cook 2003; Devis-Rozental 2020).

The stress and worry of those entering higher education feeling ill prepared for type of learning and experiences they will face at university, can have a profound effect on their self-esteem, confidence, and sense of wellbeing (Jones 2011; Lowe and Cook 2003; Hassel and Ridout 2018, Devis-Rozental and Barron 2020). It can also be detrimental to their ability to succeed and influence their reasons for withdrawing from their chosen degree.

One of the reasons why this can happen might be the disparity in expectations or experiences between schools/ colleges and higher education institutions of the requirements and skills needed to succeed at university. When looking at the things' universities can do to better understand how to support students in this transition, a report by Myhill et al (2019) found common issues students faced as they entered university:

- Difficulties in the "ways of teaching and learning", for example large group lectures which at times are not participatory
- The relationships with tutors which typically are closer in secondary schools or FE colleges
- The difference in assessment practices between HE and FE

The report concluded with a call for a better partnership stating that there is

> "very little shared working across the transition boundary and that mutual understanding of practices in the two sectors is relatively low" (Myhill et al 2019, p. 7).

Regarding schools and FE, those focusing on exam results due to the imposed governmental expectations may neglect some of the more important skills needed to succeed. This may keep secondary school teachers unwillingly from focusing on supporting students to develop the attitudes, behaviours and skills they will need to succeed at university (van Rooij 2018).

In extreme cases this may happen where students are denied an education because they are not wearing the appropriate clothing required or their hair not meeting school requirements, something that disproportionally disadvantages marginalised groups (Joseph-Salisbury 2020). In a chapter exploring her experience of starting university Rozental-Devis (2020, p. 69) argues that:

> when we feel micro-managed, that we are all on the same timeline to make one big decision that will lock in our future, it can feel too suffocating, and we end up making decisions we think are right, instead of what is individually best for us. Our socio-emotional needs are often not taken into consideration, and we are dehumanised and can often be treated as grade-output machines."

Lacking opportunities to be and become self-directed learners affects students as they enter university and must manage their time, quite often unsuccessfully, as they have no experience or practice on how to do so. A study by Devis-Rozental and Barron (2020) investigating how to support students in their transition to university, found that the areas that most worried students starting university were the academic skills required at university level, and their ability to make friends.

Seldon and Martin (2018) suggest that schools and colleges should also be working on preparing students for the practicalities of going to university. Taking on a holistic approach to education, they assert, will have a positive impact on students' wellbeing. This can seem difficult with an already full curricula and an array of activities planned for students. However, by embedding some of the required skills within the existing curricula, students can benefit, even if they end up not going to university. By doing so whilst practicing with our head, hand and heart using our practical wisdom, empathy and compassion, we can enrich the students' experience as well as our own.

There are three areas useful to reflect to prepare students better for university. The first one is to provide opportunities for students to cultivate self-efficacy during their teenage years, supporting them in developing life skills such as budgeting, cooking or managing time. These can be integrated within their chosen subjects, or explored more explicitly during their PSHE (personal, social, health education) specific sessions. Providing opportunities for students to create their own budget, investigate time management techniques an using cooking as a teaching tool can enhance students' knowledge and understanding of the world they will enter once they finish their formal education.

Learning to manage time is key to succeeding at university and knowing when to study and when to stop and rest are vital to students' wellbeing (Zhu et al. 2019). Every year we welcome high achieving students who have been used to filling all their time and believe that thinking time, resting and peer learning are not a useful use of their time as they are not "consuming" information.

We also welcome those who do not know how to use their time productively as they have never had "free time" during their time at school. They become overwhelmed and insecure of how to manage time effectively, often resulting in change in sleeping habits, insomnia or severe anxiety (Seldon and Martin 2018). This in turn causes underperformance and a decrease in their wellbeing. Consequently, understanding the way timetables at university work, and being able to practice managing their time whilst at school can be beneficial to students.

The advantage is that all teachers in the UK have been to university so they will have lived experience of what university life is like and they can share that with their students to help them prepare. The other important aspect of letting students manage their time is developing a culture of trust and respect. If students must be responsible for their own time, knowing they are trusted by their teachers can be a powerful tool to develop self-efficacy, raise resilience and motivation. How you do it or when very much depends on your teaching style as not one size fits all but using our tacit knowledge and practical wisdom to share these learning experiences can be quite powerful to students (Devis-Rozental 2018).

The second area where schools can support students to get ready for their transition is to engage with them in scholarly debates to develop their critical thinking whilst practicing the basic academic skills students will need, such as academic writing and referencing (Hassel and Ridout 2018). Developing critical thinking skills is something that can be embedded in every subject and practiced in a multitude of ways. Using open ended questions, challenging beliefs, and encouraging students to contribute freely without fear of being judged are great ways to do so. This is something that many teachers already do, but it is an important aspect to consider.

Referencing, academic writing and understanding plagiarism are all important skills that students will need, and something that they do not normally come prepared with (Myhill et al 2019). This can cause concern and apprehension as students feel unprepared. Some students may have never written academic essays or have little understanding of how to cite or reference. As a result, some commit academic offences, even if unintended, that can affect their grades and knock their confidence. Introducing these skills during their secondary school experience is important, to develop professionalism and academic integrity and give students confidence in their abilities.

The third aspect to consider is embedding within the curricula opportunities for students to develop their socio-emotional intelligence (SEI), so that they have the motivation, resilience self-regulation and self-awareness to manage this difficult transition (Devis-Rozental 2020). This, I argue, is the most important aspect to get students ready for whichever transition they plan to do. Taking the time to support students to develop knowledge of metacognition (learning about learning) by introducing them to theories of learning and applying them in practical exercises such as role modelling, through Lego activities or in their reflections can be useful ways to introduce these subjects (Devis-Rozental 2018). Engage in learning about themselves, their strengths and how to hone them (Devis-Rozental 2018), as well as developing a growth mindset (O'Brien and Lomas 2017), are key to students' wellbeing.

Doing so will have a positive impact on their cognitive abilities, reduce stress and manage their relationships (Devis-Rozental and Farquharson 2020), something students see as important once they arrive at university. Research by Rozental-Devis (2018) found that students develop their SEI by

- Learning about it and its main areas
- Reflecting on their own experience
- Having teachers role modelling these prosocial behaviours
- Being in an environment where their basic needs are met to allow them to flourish

Thus, educators should role model and demonstrate the prosocial behaviours they want their students to gain, allowing opportunities for students to reflect, practice and learn about these as key aspects of their school journey.

There is much that schools already do to get students ready for university, and this must not be underestimated. It is also important to acknowledge that policies and governmental requirements can limit educators' ability to be flexible in their approach. Nevertheless, we are in a profession that shapes minds and hearts, considering this by developing more humanised spaces within our classrooms and being proactive in preparing students for their transition into adulthood is a great responsibility. It requires the knowledge of the key areas that students will need to develop, some mentioned throughout this paper, as well as our practical wisdom as we practice with our head, hand and heart, to ensure that those who pass through our classrooms flourish and become the best they can be.

1997 words

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