

Annual Academic Practice Symposium 2015

Notes from parallel session by Martin Barker

Differentiated Teaching and learning: Crucial for Successful Transitions?

The session ran as a series of questions. These are used as subheadings below, along with a brief summary of the discussion which accompanied each.

Q1: Is the population of your students becoming more diverse?

Yes – but beware of labelling and stereotyping students into groups and generalising about their habits and abilities as a result.

Q2: Do all your students learn in the same way, all the time?

Clearly not, but dealing with this is something that we don't really tackle despite being aware of it. Again, grouping and classifying isn't the answer.

Q3: Are some of your students smarter than you?

Of course and this is a good thing. Teaching exposes us to new ideas - theirs as well as new ones that develop as a result of teaching and therefore being forced to recast our existing ideas. The 'impostor syndrome' of feeling like a fraud in teaching situations was discussed and generally recognised in all of us at some point in our careers (and still is in most).

Q4: Do some of your students have disability provisions?

A unanimous 'yes'. Discussion ranged around provision for students with disclosed disabilities and learning differences, and the point that this is no longer seen by most teaching staff as anything other than part of their everyday duties.

Q5: Is your teaching and learning environment changing?

Yes – but do we welcome this? Discussion around different methods employed and the variability in success, plus the flexibility of staff themselves to accommodate such changes in the face of other pressures.

Q6: Do all students achieve the same outcomes?

Counter Q: do we expect them to? Is allowing students to see where they fit on a wider class mark distribution necessarily a bad thing? Is it motivating for some? Does it discourage others? Learning gain was also discussed in the context of entry tariffs.

Q7: At a given stage, are all your students thinking in the same way?

Probably not, but is this acceptable? Should we accept a degree of complacency as expected in a population, and that for some students, learning by acquisition might be enough to meet their demands (see Q6).

Q8. Do all your students see problems in the same way?

Staff come at problems in different ways too, so this is not a bad thing at all provided the rationale for teaching a topic in a particular way is explained. Qs were raised about how widening access influences this question as well.

Q9: Is there a case for differentiated teaching and / or assessment in your courses / programmes?

This led to a wide-ranging discussion over the existence of 'streaming', for example in language teaching, and whether screening at pre-entry stages would help the motivation of both the higher achievers (perhaps who hold an existing qualification in a subject taught at first year), and would help staff to focus on helping to bring new entrants to the discipline up to a particular standard. Wider discussion introduced 'extended' work, designed to push students who were coping with coursework easily and were in danger of demotivation. This does demand resource; simply giving high-achievers a set of further readings is not sufficient; for example extra discussion groups / tutorials are needed to support and scaffold such extra work in order to help students see its importance for them (individualisation).