Stepping Stones 2024 – Quality Assurance

Peter Sharp, September 2024

Methodology

I attended the evening before each section of the stepping stones course and delivered training to the tutors focussing on the aims of the sessions, introducing challenge to the students and building oracy through questioning and discussion. I then spent the first day of each session touring all the subjects being delivered and reviewing the effectiveness of the sessions.

Findings

The overall quality of the sessions was excellent. There are a number of reasons for this. The first is the academic knowledge and enthusiasm of the tutors. The majority of tutors are current or recent students of their subjects, with many currently involved in research. This meant that they all had outstanding subject knowledge in their fields, along with a huge amount of enthusiasm for what they were discussing.

The tutors also had very high expectations of the students, a result of many currently being involved in undergraduate teaching at top universities. They combined these high expectations with an approachability, enhanced by their closeness in age and experience to the students. This meant that in all sessions the students were engaging confidently in discussions and asking questions without hesitancy. In some cases students were taking time to adapt to the level of challenge, although speaking to the students later in the day it was clear that this adaptation happened rapidly. Whether students were calculating enthalpy changes, discussing the rationing of organs for transplant or writing sorting algorithms they were all fully engaged in their learning and making great progress.

The sessions are almost all conducted in small groups, allowing for seminar-style teaching which in many cases mimicked a supervision environment at Oxford or Cambridge. This meant that students were constantly engaged with discussion and developing verbal skills which would prepare them well for university. This also meant that students rapidly broke down any barriers from not knowing each other and by lunchtime on the first day it was impossible for me as an observer to tell whether students knew each other prior to arrival or not. These small groups were also able to respond to the needs of the students, for example developing discussions in Law around students' experience and interests or using their own experiences as case studies in Philosophy and Geography. This ability to respond to the students' interests was also enhanced by the amount of time available in the programme and the flexibility tutors have to programme that time effectively. In some cases the students were in larger groups which meant this opportunity was less available, although the tutors managed these groups well.

The academic challenge and level of discussion was very strong and will have prepared the students well for entry and study at a highly selective university. In addition, many tutors explicitly taught university skills such as how to approach a challenging lecture

and how to take useful notes. There were also many opportunities for discussion of applications and courses, again benefiting from tutors who had been through this process themselves in the recent past. This was often skilfully handled by the tutors to avoid creating stress for the students, for example by discussing applications whilst creating their own sketchbooks in the Architecture sessions.

As well as the tutorial time itself, the experience of being in College with their peers and mentors encouraged the students to embrace their academic discipline. At every meal I could hear students pursuing their passions, whether through discussing the history of those in the portraits in hall or continuing their debate on politics of place around the lunch table.

Other observations

I have a few observations which may be worth consideration.

- One of the largest groups was for Mathematics which was significantly larger than Engineering and Biology. This is out of line with applications to universities where Engineering applications are typically 1.5x larger in number than Mathematics. This is worth exploring: are students choosing to study Mathematics at Stepping Stones and then apply for Physical Sciences? Or is there some selection effect which favours Mathematicians in the admissions process? There is no evidence of anything to worry about but it is worth asking the question.
- There is an argument for a more detailed analysis of course numbers to check for any anomalies, including looking at a gender breakdown. This is effectively a way of quality assuring the selection process.
- There was a wide variety of methods for sharing resources with the students and those students had a variety of devices to access those resources – could this be more standardised?

Recommendations

1. Expand and bring earlier the online training for tutors to allow there to be more confidence in utilising younger tutors with recent university experience, but perhaps more limited teaching experience. This would also allow the training to take place prior to the tutors' session planning. For example, 2x 1 hour sessions online in July.
2. Consider whether the fact the tutors are current students/academics be more of a feature of the programme. The training offered could also then be a secondary benefit by providing development of the tutors.
3. Consider a review of the selection process by looking at the admissions statistics by subject and gender and comparing against national benchmarks.
4. Consider a clearer and more centralised approach to student devices and electronic resources.