**Which aspects of university life are most and least helpful in ensuring a successful transition to Higher Education? A qualitative snapshot of student perceptions**

Whilst there is a significant consensus, in the literature, that student transition to HE plays a major role in future academic performance and success, there is, as yet, no broad agreement as to how best to support students during this process. Theoretical accounts of transition offer some direction to educators but acting on these accounts may be problematic, as many students do not understand the process they are experiencing or the needs of their new environment. Without this understanding, well-developed interventions might be seen as irrelevant, therefore failing to gain student engagement at that time. A better understanding of which aspects of university life do seem most relevant to students, during transition, may help universities to better target their support in ways which might engage students. This qualitative study posed two short open questions to two cohorts of students, seeking to identify which aspects of their experience they found most and least helpful. In this way it was hoped to gain some insight into which aspects of university life were most dominant in their thinking. Responses were coded and analysed to identify key themes, among which were – 1) social support, 2) psychological mind set and lifestyle and 3) university actions. The implications and limitations of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: student transition; first year experience; FYHE; student perceptions;

**Introduction**

There is general acceptance, within the literature, that a student’s transition into university is a key element in determining future academic persistence, satisfaction and attainment (Cook, Ruston & McIntosh, 2006; Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006; Nelson, Smith & Clark, 2011; Palmer, O’Kane & Owens, 2009; Tinto, 1975; 2013). However, it has long been recognised that the transition into higher education can be a challenging and stressful process (Fisher & Hood, 1987; Wilson et al, 2006) not easily managed or achieved. It is not unusual for students going through transition to experience psychological distress, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, a reduction in self-esteem and isolation (Fisher & Hood, 1987; Hicks & Heastie, 2008; Palmer, O’Kane & Owens, 2009; Stanley et al, 2009). All of which suggests that to successfully complete the process of transition, students must be offered appropriate and effective support.

However, there is less certainty and agreement about what universities should do to better support their students through this process. A review of the literature provides many examples of possible interventions, which, despite focussing on completely different aspects of the student experience, appear to be equally successful in reducing distress and improving transition (Lawrie, et al, 2013; Walker, 2010; Kift, Nelson & Clark, 2010; Kitchener, 2009; Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006; Cook, Rushton & McIntosh, 2006). Viewing this range of successful interventions, educators could be forgiven for being uncertain as to whether they should aim interventions at academic, social, cultural, psychological or personal aspects of the student experience.

A number of authors have proposed theoretical models, which seek to guide university action. Tinto (1975; 2003; 2006; 2013), for instance, has long argued that for successful transition and academic performance to occur students must first academically and socially integrate into their new institution. If the quality of either integration is low, students become more vulnerable to drop out and \ or achieve poor academic performance. Tinto has, therefore, argued that it is incumbent upon universities to ensure students are adequately supported to manage these integrations successfully.

Others have suggested that transition should be seen as a psychological process (Blichfeldt & Gram, 2013) during which students must adopt new thinking and behaviours in order to successfully adapt to their new environment (Richardson et al, 2012; Cook & Ruston, 2007; Yorke & Longden, 2008). In this view, universities should adopt practices and interventions focussed upon speeding up students’ psychological adaptation to their new environment.

Finally, a few, particularly led by the work of Kift and Nelson (Kift, Nelson & Clark, 2010; Nelson, Smith & Clark, 2011; Kift, 2009), have argued that solutions lie in the adoption of particular pedagogies that allow for learning which is ‘scaffolded.’

Helpful though these theories and strategies might be, they nevertheless pose a potential problem. Students themselves do not necessarily understand the process through which they are going, the environment they are entering or the skills and knowledge they must acquire (Brinkworth et al, 2013; Walker, 2010; Wilson, 2009; Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006). Universities could design interventions to help students integrate, adapt and learn but fail to engage students in these interventions because they do not see the need or relevance *at the time they are being offered.* Indeed evidence can be found in the literature to support this presumption (Hoyne & McNaught, 2013; Pearson and Naug, 2013). It therefore follows, that to help students understand the support they need, universities must begin by first engaging with the issues that most preoccupy them at the time they are most relevant.

One possible way of better understanding this may be to explore which aspects of university life students find most and least helpful in achieving a successful transition into university. Although it would be risky to take student answers at face value, it is proposed that their answers may reveal which aspects of university are dominant in their thinking at this early stage of their academic careers. This in turn may help guide universities in their initial interactions with students.

There has, however, been limited evaluation of what behaviours or aspects of university life that students actually find most or least helpful during this period and no studies appear to have been reported in the literature which specifically ask students these questions. Those studies that do consider this question tend to either focus on a small number of narrative accounts, usually occurring after the period of transition or to pre-determine the range of possible answers through quantitative survey designs (Maunder et al, 2013;). Both of these methods, whilst providing valuable insights, have inbuilt potential weaknesses.

   The reliability of narrative memory is in itself questionable (Belli & Loftus, 1996; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), with many researchers suggesting that we are often unaware of the true reasons we felt or behaved in the way that we did (Kahneman, 2012), particularly during periods of high emotional arousal (Le Doux, 1995; 1998). For this reason, student narratives of transition, particularly those recorded after the early weeks of the first term, cannot be taken to be entirely accurate reflections of their actual lived experiences. Indeed, there is recognition in some of the literature that this may be the case (see: Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006).

Quantitative surveys in this field seem usually to be designed by researchers who are themselves members of staff (Maunder et al, 2013). This potentially means that the questions and answers provided may be more relevant to the concerns and understanding of a member of staff rather than of a contemporary student.

The current study was designed to partly address these possible weaknesses and to provide further insight into how and where universities should focus their support. This was acheived by taking a snapshot view of the perspectives of a larger number of students through some simply phrased open questions, posed while the students were actually experiencing the transition to Higher Education. The study proposed that by asking some very short, open questions it may be possible to better understand the dominant positive and negative preoccupations of students during the process of transition. Whilst, of course, acknowledging that focussing on these preoccupations may not in itself provide solutions to the question of how best to support new students, understanding where students are focussed at this time may usefully suggest where universities might begin and thus make a useful contribution to the field. In other words – if interventions begin where students are most preoccupied, they may be more likely to engage students at a key moment and open the possibility of addressing other problems while their attention is fixed.

**Methodology**

A total of four open questions (2 each), were addressed to two cohorts of first year students (2012\13 and 2013\4) at a medium sized, post-92, UK university, in the first six weeks of the academic term. Questions were emailed to all first year, full time, undergraduate, on-campus students at the end of that year’s ‘Welcome survey’ and an offer of support from relevant services.

Students in the 2012\13 cohort were posed the following:

* Please list anything that you have found to make your experience better since coming to university.
* Please list anything that you have found to make your experience worse since coming to university.

Students in the 2013\14 cohort were posed the following:

* Pleased indicate what you have found most helpful about your early university experiences.
* Please indicate what you have found least helpful about your early university experiences.

Answers were returned via email and compiled in the order in which they were returned. Two researchers then separately read and coded the answers seeking to identify key themes and wording. These themes were then synthesised, where possible, to allow clearer trends to emerge and provide sufficient weight for analysis. The findings of both researchers were then brought together for further synthesis to allow a final picture to emerge.

**Findings**

353 students provided answers in 2012\13. 145 students provided answers in 2013/14.

Although this return rate was disappointingly low, it is not entirely out of step with some other attempts to research general student populations (Richardson et al, 2012; Topham & Moller, 2010) and did provide a significant amount of text for analysis. The response rate may have been influenced by the fact that the questions were issued at the end of that year’s Welcome Survey which comprised 38 tick box questions.

Not all students completed both of the questions posed to them, however, all answers given were included for analysis.

Students responded to the questions in different ways, with some providing direct one or two word answers and other providing detailed paragraphs of up to 112 words.  Following detailed analysis a number of key themes emerged – it was noted that the dominant themes were consistent across both cohorts, although those in the 2013\14 cohort had a slightly greater tendency to focus on the actions and responses of the university, whilst those in the previous year focussed more on general experience. It is not clear if this is the result of the change in the wording of the question or if it reflects a change in the characteristics of those who responded to the survey.

The sections below summarise the themes that occurred most across both cohorts and one, which the authors had anticipated would be a major theme but which did not emerge in the responses as anticipated. It is included within this section as its relative absence may, in itself, be noteworthy considering some of the assumptions behind much standard university planning and practice. Where example responses are provided to illustrate key points, in each case other similar responses were available.

***Social support***

The dominant theme to emerge from both cohorts and from both positive and negative questions, related to the importance of social support and integration, with significantly more references made to this theme than to any other. This was true both when students were asked what had helped:

  ‘Spending as much time with new friends and people as possible.’

‘Having friends in the same situation that I can work through with and share my worries, it makes me feel like I am not alone and makes the whole situation a little less daunting.’

Or when students were asked what was least helpful or had made their experiences worse:

  ‘Being left out.’

‘Being at university between lectures because then I remember what a social outcast I am.’

A number of students also identified that spending large amounts of time alone made them feel worse.

‘Staying in my room on my own has made it worse sometimes as I fell (sic) isolated.’

In general there were clear indications that whether or not a student had made friends was a key preoccupation at this stage of the first year. This was not isolated to traditional aged students, as a number of mature students also identified social isolation as the aspect of university life that had made things worse.

  Some students made specific reference to where they felt the university had either helped or failed to support their social integration into their new environment.

‘I have found the activities to get to know the lecturers and other students useful as they made me get to know people.’

‘Being put into very large lectures during induction week and not having any sort of team building exercises to get to know anyone [was unhelpful].’

The preoccupation with the importance of social integration was not confined to the need to make friends. Interactions with staff, in particular lecturing staff, also appeared to have a significant bearing on early experiences of university. Again students made reference to this, both when asked for things that helped:

‘The friendly and knowledgable (sic) approach of the lecturers that help in making you feel confident to approach them to discuss anything.’

‘I have found that the lecturers have been inspirational as they have had pasts similar to my own, and they have shown we can achieve what they have.’

Or when asked what they found unhelpful:

‘My […] teacher who is not very helpful and I don't think I’ll enjoy doing [my course] because of her.’

Additionally, there were indications that some students were devoting time to maintaining previously existing social networks at home. Some authors have suggested that in order to successfully complete the transition to a new social environment students must let go of previous support networks (Palmer, O’Kane & Owens, 2009; Stanley et al, 2009; Cook, Rushton & McIntosh, 2006) and indeed, in some instances, students identified the maintenance of ties to home as being unhelpful:

‘Talking to my friends from home too much as it just makes me miss them more.’

However this was not consistent and a number of students appeared to find regular contact with old friends and family to be positive, at least for this early part of term.

***Psychological mind-set and lifestyle***

A number of students identified their own thinking and behaviour as important factors in ensuring a successful transition. This was evident from the responses of a number of students, which clearly described cognitive strategies for ensuring they remained positive and underpinned their own resilience.

‘Correcting any negative thoughts that may enter my head with positive ones.’

‘Having a focus and determined mind, and reading over Henry Ford quote: ‘When everything seems to be going against you, remember that the airplane takes off against the wind, not with it.’’

This contrasted with a number of students who suggested that negative thinking patterns had made their experience worse:

‘Reflecting on my past and thinking ‘what could’ or ‘what would’ have happened if I had taken a different route. If I will become a failure.’

‘Focusing on my negative feelings, such as wondering whether I'll settle in, even though I know that it will take time.’

This awareness of the importance of psychological wellbeing was also reflected in comments highlighting the impact of some of the interventions offered by the university…

‘The welcome talk was very motivational and useful. Having someone congratulate us on getting into university and saying we can all do well and to believe in ourselves was great.’

‘I feel like we were bombarded with paper and information in my first few weeks at University that it made me feel so overwhelmed and scared that I straight away felt unsettled about starting the course.’

…and also of the impact of lifestyle choices adopted by each individual student. A number of responses, for instance, identified the overconsumption of alcohol as having a deleterious effect on transition.

‘Drinking. Seriously, if you're in a bad mood and you go out and drink it only makes you feel worse.’

Whilst others were able to point to positive actions they had taken which had made them feel better.

‘A nice walk through the park really helps clear my mind, getting out and being amongst nature always seems to work for me!’

‘Compare the amount of work done to those lacking, compare my ability to the worst in the group, earlier nights and mornings, keeping the house clean.’

In general, students suggested that good, proactive organisation, remaining busy, focussing on positives, taking time to relax, exercise, using support and socialising helped to make their transition experiences better. By contrast, it was suggested, across many responses, that poor sleep, too much alcohol, a lack of activity, isolating yourself and focussing on negative thoughts made students feel worse.

***University actions***

A number of authors have argued that the early actions of universities have a real and measurable impact on transition, retention and performance (Tinto, 2013; Mayhew, Vanderlinded and Kim, 2010; Harvey & Drew, 2006; Evans, 2000). The findings of this study broadly supported this assertion, however, it should be noted that for the participants in this research, at least, these impacts were potentially positive and negative. For instance, while a number of students referred to the value of their induction and orientation programme;

‘The induction […] provided a good insight to what to expect at university.’

‘Spending the first week as an induction week has been great for allowing me time to learn my way around campus and Derby as a whole.’

Others were much less complimentary.

‘The long induction in the first few days was a drawn out experience, especially for those who had travelled a long way and wanted a day or two to settle in.’

It is difficult to be certain if these differences in perception are due to the differing preferences of individual students or variations in induction practice. As was partly reflected in the social support section, students generally expressed a preference for induction sessions in small groups to allow for team building and socialisation. Large gatherings in lecture theatres attracted more negative comments.

Other practices identified as unhelpful were ‘information overload’;

‘The sheer amount of information about everything that is thrown at you in a very short period of time.’

Repetition;

‘A week of induction going over the same topics every day.’

‘There was a lot of repetition in some of the activities.’

And excessive demands on their time.

‘There was so much stuff to do for the first few days, I couldn't find time to do other stuff.’

However, students were more likely to identify that planned interventions had been helpful rather than unhelpful, both in terms of the preparatory activities the university undertakes prior to the start of the year;

‘Open days gave me a feel of the university and I was able to meet most of the lectures on my course. The applicant day allowed me to meet people on my course.’

‘Mentors from the Get Ahead Event - Such helpful and brilliant people!’

As well as those provided once term started.

*Support*

A number of students identified the importance of knowing and understanding the support that was available to them. This seemed to be a fairly broad based perception taking in the support provided by professionals, academics and the institution as a whole.

‘From the very first day, all staff have been very welcoming, and the chat with the man from the wellbeing service informed me very clearly where I need to go if I need any help or support.’

‘The amount of support available for students.’

Some students went beyond initial perceptions to analyse and provide reasons to explain why they found this so important.

‘The amount of support available is fantastic… taking the time to go over things such as student wellbeing shows that the uni wants and cares that their students succeed.’

*Organisation*

Whilst planned interventions on the part of the university were likely to be viewed as helpful, unplanned, inadvertent action or inaction was often perceived as unhelpful or as having made the experience worse. In other words, when students perceived that things had gone wrong it had a significant impact on their transition. Given the level of emotional arousal experienced by many students at this time (Palmer, O’Kane & Owens, 2009; Stanley et al, 2009) it is not surprising that, what may be viewed as minor organisational problems, on the part of the institution, might be viewed by the student as significant and disturbing.

‘Trying to resolve certain issues - especially with student finance - and trying to speak to somebody at university came up with no solutions for me and stressed me out even more.’

‘Not knowing my individual timetable, constant changes of the timetable making it impossible to organise support.’

In particular, students stressed a need to clearly understand simple day-to-day practicalities and emphasised that it was unhelpful when they did not have this.

‘[I need] A clear understanding of what is happening when in my subject, and what I need to bring to my lectures.’

‘Not knowing certain information, like car parking passes etc.’

‘A general feeling of not know enough, feeling a bit lost and not confident enough to ask for help.’

The issue of getting lost, for instance, was repeatedly mentioned as a practical issue as well as a metaphorical one.

‘I get lost a lot, I feel as though there should be a clearer map.’

‘Getting lost in uni and poor signposting/directions’

It may be a useful lesson for universities to remember that their actions will have an impact on the transition of their students whether or not those actions are intended or have been considered on the context of transition.

***Academic concerns***

It was noticeable that, for the participants in this study, academic concerns did not emerge as a major pre-occupation at this stage of the year. Rather, student comments tended to reflect a focus upon the social, personal and organisational aspects of university life. The small number who did make reference to the academic side of their experience, focussed upon a lack of confidence in their own knowledge and skills and discomfort that they did not fully understand what would be expected of them.

‘Discussions about exams on the first day of lectures, as well as being asked to research, with no understanding of what needs to be researched.’

‘Not enough information about writing workbooks, journals, essays, and expected content and/or layouts, could just be that I have been away far too long for this kind of writing.’

It is possible that some other influences, such as the phrasing of the question, the time and place in which most students will have completed the questions or the Welcome Survey, which was distributed alongside these questions, may have focussed students away from the academic aspects of their experience when submitting their responses to this study. However, the lack of references to academic work is noticeable and potentially instructive if these findings were repeated under other circumstances. If students are generally pre-occupied with their experiences outside of the classroom, in the early weeks of term, it may have implications for the construction of curriculum and inform the way in which learning may be scaffolded (Kift, 2009) for maximum benefit.

**Implications and Limitations**

This study was designed to provide a brief snapshot of the dominant negative and positive pre-occupations of students in relation to their early experiences of university. As such, there are some clear limitations to these findings and care must be taken not to over-interpret how much they tell us.

Significantly, it must be remembered that these questions were posed to two cohorts of first year, undergraduate students (around 5,000) and received just under 500 replies. The self-selecting nature of the participants in itself may have skewed the data. Secondly, as has previously been discussed, the environment and timing of the study may have influenced some of the responses – sending the questions via email may have resulted in students replying when they were in their accommodation rather than on campus and so changed their immediate focus. Finally, the study was limited to one university, of a particular type (Post-92) and caution should be urged when relating these findings to other institutions.

However, as a snapshot, this study does provide some potentially interesting implications for universities. The study set out to determine if dominant student preoccupations could be identified in the early weeks of the first year and a number of themes did emerge from the responses received.

In particular, it was clear that the need to build new social networks and to accomplish, what Tinto refers to as social integration, was a dominant preoccupation among the participants. Those who had found social networks, readily identified this as a key factor in early transition success. More importantly, it loomed large in the thoughts of those who had not found their social place in the new environment and this lack was starkly expressed in emotionally negative terms. Some authors have commented that universities cannot assume that social integration will happen naturally or leave socialisation entirely to the Student’s Union (Richardson et al, 2012; Brinkworth et al, 2013; Hicks & Heastie, 2008). In fact, the process of social inclusion for some can become a process of exclusion for others, placing them at risk of isolation, negative emotional arousal and potentially leading to withdrawal or failure (Palmer, O’Kane & Owens, 2009; Stanley et al, 2009). Addressing these concerns proactively would therefore seem to be a sensible step on the part of universities. Indeed, this was born out in the responses, as those who had been assisted to socialise through group work and team building exercises specifically identified this as important and helpful.

There was, however, support too for the view that transition has a psychological as well as a social component. Students were able to identify both positive and negative cognitive and behavioural strategies that had an impact upon their transition experiences. Engaging with these strategies and supporting students to address negative thoughts, emotions and behaviours and to develop positive strategies and beliefs could potentially ease student transition and build internal resilience. In addition, it may send key messages to students that their new university cares about them, their wellbeing and achievements and thus improve early sense of belonging.

Responses also suggest that universities must carefully consider all of their actions and interactions, within the first few weeks of term, as potentially having a significant impact on the transition experiences of their students. Small administrative and organisational oversights and problems can apparently have a weighty, negative impact. It, therefore, follows that practical, procedural processes and arrangements should be designed around the transition needs of students, as much as the administrative needs of the institution. It also follows that as much thought and planning should go into the design of these processes as into the early introductions to curriculum and available support.

Similarly problems experienced by students should be swiftly addressed to avoid alienating the student from their new environment.

However, there was also evidence for the positive impact that well planned and directed university interventions can have on student transition experiences.

The possible lessons regarding academic concerns in the first few weeks should be treated far more cautiously. The fact that participants in this survey made few references to the academic side of their student life does not verifiably mean that it is not a key concern to them at this time. It is, however, possible that as their university career begins, students are more focussed on the other aspects of their new life. This is worthy of further study as, if repeatable, it may provide significant lessons for the future development of first year curriculum and pedagogy that more closely considers the link between learning and student life outside of the classroom and library.

**Conclusions**

Whilst student transition remains a complex and multi-faceted process, this study suggests that universities may benefit from focussing their initial interactions with students on supporting social integration, promoting positive thinking patterns and behaviours and challenging negative thinking and lifestyles. Institutions may also wish to consider the potential impact of all early activities on student transition, whilst remaining confident that it is possible to positively influence this process.

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