



Fears of failure and transition into higher education

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Abstract

Transition into Higher Education (HE) can involve significant changes to an individual's social role and environment, posing challenges to new students. Fears of academic and social failure are well established in secondary schools and thus can transfer to HE. Despite this, there is little qualitative research investigating how students are affected by and deal with the two fears during the transition into and throughout HE. The current research studied the transition experiences of 12 first and third year undergraduates. Opportunity-snowball sampling was used to recruit six male and six female students. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect qualitative data, which were analysed using thematic analysis. Main themes and sub-themes were identified, leading to constructions of thematic maps. Students were negatively and positively affected by the fears of academic and social failure during transition into university. However, over time the majority learned to balance the two fears. Some possible gender differences were found, limitations and suggestions for future research were discussed.

KEY WORDS:	FEAR OF ACADEMIC FAILURE	FEAR OF SOCIAL FAILURE	TRANSITION	HIGHER EDUCATION
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Social and Academic Fears of Failure during Transition into Higher Education

My interest of the transition into HE was ignited by my personal experience and the differing experiences of my friends. Upon arriving on university campus I remember fearing the unknown, not fitting in, failing to make friends and being overwhelmed by academic work. During the fresher's week I made many friends from stereotypically male sports teams and enjoyed socialising with them at the expense of spending time doing academic work. As months went by and the workload intensified, academic challenges poured upon me and I started to feel the pressure of maintaining and meeting my academic and social expectations. Sometimes I felt unhappy when the workload intensified. At times the fears of academic failure were overwhelming, and when coursework deadlines approached I prioritised academic work over socialising. This often made me feel uneasy, I felt lonely, I did not socialise. My friends and I compensated for this when the workload declined, we socialised at the expense of not doing additional readings and being hung-over in the lectures.

In my case, fears of academic and social failure have reduced over the course of my degree. This was especially the case after successfully establishing my own friendship group and progressing to second and third year of study. However, I noticed that many of my friends' accounts differed from my own. Some isolated themselves from university's social life and focused entirely on academic work. Whereas others engaged in so much socialising that they often missed lectures and occasionally assignment deadlines, which resulted in last minute work. Those who did not find the right balance between socialising and working, or could not prioritise academic work during exams, dropped out. These differing experiences of the transition into HE and university life, led me to the current investigation of how students are affected by the fears of academic and social failure.

Literature Review – Fear in Education

Anxiety/fear amongst students is the most frequently reported emotion in education (Pekrun, Goetz & Titz, 2002), yet it has received little focused attention in education literature (Jackson, 2010). Fear can be defined as "solicitude, anxiety for the safety of a person or thing" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2013). However, in educational and psychological research many point out that the distinction between fear and anxiety is blurred (e.g. Rachman, 1998). This leads some researchers to use the concepts of fear and anxiety interchangeably (e.g. Jackson, 2010; Gill, 2007; Bauman, 2006). This is also the case throughout this project. In secondary education it has been shown that most of the pupils try to balance academic work with social life; they attempt to pursue both academic and social goals (Jackson, 2006; Ryan, Jamison, Shin & Thompson, 2012). However, fears of failure are associated with both of these goals. Fears of academic failure (FAF) can emerge from pressures to succeed and can lead to inhibition of autonomy, academic underachievement and decline in self-esteem (Fazey & Fazey, 2001; Vinson *et al.*, 2010). Whereas, fears of social failure (FSF; being unpopular), can stem from interactions with peers and school environment, and can result in marginalisation, loneliness and bullying (Francis, 2005).

The literature tends to make a distinction between success-oriented (characterised by enthusiasm, resilience and motivation for learning) and failure-fearing (characterised by fear of failure and self-doubt) pupils (e.g. Elliot & Church, 1997). This suggests that not all pupils fear academic failure (Jackson, 2006). However, De Castella, Byrne and Covington (2013) argue that the motives to avoid failure and approach success are interwoven and may interact in ways that lead to different motivational orientations of pupils. Pupils high in FAF and low in success orientation are most likely to use self-handicapping strategies (deflecting cause of failure away from their ability, e.g. task avoidance) to protect themselves from implications of failure (De Castella *et al.*, 2013). Being highly success driven tends to mediate effects of FAF and pupils who are success-oriented and high in FAF may channel their fears into increased effort and academic study to increase their chances of success (De Castella *et al.*, 2013). However, even some success-oriented pupils can adopt defensive pessimism, a strategy of having unrealistically low expectations which has also been associated with lower academic achievement (Martin, Marsh & Debus, 2001). This is of particular importance because it demonstrates that some success-oriented pupils can be affected by FAF (De Castella *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, it suggests that the costs associated with FAF can be high for some failure-fearing and success-oriented pupils (e.g. Vinson *et al.*, 2007; Martin *et al.*, 2001).

For some pupils balancing FSF which co-exist and compete with FAF is a serious challenge (Jackson, 2006). This is because avoiding academic failure consists of overt academic work, whereas avoiding social failure includes avoidance of academic work (Jackson, 2010). Furthermore, FSF can lead to reinforcement of stereotypically gendered behaviours which may impact on academic performance and could potentially exacerbate FAF. For example, some pupils may exhibit disruptive behaviours in the classrooms, in order to 'fit in' and to be seen as one of the 'lads/ladettes' (Jackson, 2006). There are also gender differences in the prevalence of these fears in schools; females report higher levels of fear than males (Jackson, 2006; Andrews & Wilding, 2004). However, this could be due to dominant social constructions of masculinity and femininity, where females are expected to show emotions and are seen as more emotionally fragile than males. Thus, it is more socially acceptable for them to discuss their fears (Jackson, 2006).

Since fear/anxiety is the most frequently reported emotion by students, it is reasonable to assume that fears experienced in secondary school can be exhibited during the transition into and throughout HE (Jackson, 2010; Pekrun *et al.*, 2002). This is because the academic and social challenges associated with the transition into HE, can potentially exacerbate FSF and FAF. Consequently, students may fear the academic demands, and concomitantly, they may fear isolation and loneliness (Goleman, 1996; Andrews & Wilding, 2004). Considering that both fears have been associated with depression (Sacks & Bugental, 1987; Najafipour, Najafipour & Yaktatalab, 2012), failure to find the balance between them may have serious consequences on students' well-being. This may potentially help to explain student dropout rates (see Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2009; Crosling & Heagney, 2008).

Transition into HE: Academic Challenges and FAF

Transition into HE is a passage from one place to another, it is a process that happens over a period of time rather than a one off event (Lawrence, 2005). Due to the fact that transitions into HE generally involve significant changes to an individual's role and environment, they can be challenging for new students (Knight & Rochon, 2012). This is because changes brought about by the transition into HE can represent either hazard or an opportunity for growth and sometimes both. These hazards and opportunities can lead to social pressures which may result in fears of failure (Sugarman, 1986).

According to Parkinson and Forrester (2004) some students find transition difficult because their expectations of university differ to their actual experiences. This has been further supported by Yorke (2000a) and Yorke and Longden (2008). Both studies found that differing student expectations, the wrong choice of modules and the wrong choice of a degree, were the most common reasons why students dropped out of university. In other words, poor transition into HE, facilitated by mismatch between expectations and actual experiences can contribute to failure to progress (Yorke, 2000b). This is because major decisions which can impact on student's life, such as choosing a major/minor, can lead to an increase in anxiety levels, especially amongst indecisive students (Germeijs, Luyckx, Notelaers, Goossens & Verschueren, 2012).

Transitions can also have negative effects on students' academic self-concept (ASC; Jackson, 2003). This is because many students would have been perceived as the brightest pupils in further education (FE). The *Big-Fish-Little-Pond-Effect* (BFLPE), experienced by students before the transition into HE, may have led them to the view that their ability levels are higher than those of other students, encouraging positive ASC (Jackson, 2003; Lüdtke, Köller, Marsh & Trautwein, 2005). However, during the transition into university, many students recognise that others are of equal ability or even more able than they are, thus the BFLPE can disappear (Jackson, 2003). This realisation has been shown to negatively affect ASC of some female students (Jackson, 2003). ASC is associated with academic achievement (e.g. Marsh & Yeung, 1997). Thus, the shift of BFLPE due to transition into HE, can indirectly affect academic achievement through its relationship with ASC (Jackson, 2003), potentially resulting in FAF.

FAF during the transition could also be exacerbated by students' struggle to become autonomous learners (Bingham & O'Hara, 2007). Many students have difficulties adjusting to university's teaching methods (Macaskill & Taylor, 2010), especially to independent learning (Leese, 2010). This could be due to the fact that FE institutions do not prepare students adequately for university's learning style. For example; Cambridge University's International Examinations Unit (2011), found that 11% of surveyed students reported that they could not deal with their academic workloads, whereas 50% reported that they had no independent learning and research skills upon arriving to university. Moreover, Lowe and Cooke (2003) found that from a sample of 2,519 undergraduates, 21% reported having difficulties with independent learning and 20% thought that academic pressures were worse than expected. This suggests that some students are unprepared for some aspects of university life.

Interestingly, FAF in HE can decline over time. In O'Shea's (2013) study, during the transition into HE 15 students said that their biggest fear was of academic failure.

However, after receiving marks for their assignments, some of them felt more generally and academically confident, reported feeling like they belonged at the university and identified themselves as a 'learner' in the university environment. O'Shea suggested that this was because receiving positive feedback was seen as a 'turning point' for students during transition into HE. This led O'Shea to conclude that over time with sufficient amount of 'turning points' students can overcome their FAF.

Transition into HE: Social Challenges and FSF

As well as being challenging from an academic perspective, transition into HE is also challenging socially and may induce FSF. Thus, even if FAF disappears, FSF may still persist (O'Shea, 2013). Larose, Bernier and Tarabulsky (2005) argue that an important aspect of the transition into HE is the ability to manage social and academic expectations. This is because as well as having to manage lecturers' and their parents' expectations of having to become independent learners, students have to adjust to new social environments (Larose *et al.*, 2005). Moreover, many researchers agree that establishing friendships, peer groups and having social support are key determinants of successful transition (e.g. Thomas, 2002; Lowe & Cook, 2003).

Similarly, O'Shea (2013) found that identification as a student is important during transition, since students can experience university as an 'alien environment' (Askham, 2008). This was further supported by Brooman and Darwent (2013) who also found that a sense of social integration (sense of belonging, relationship with staff and old friends) had a positive effect on the transition experience of students, and was positively associated with intentions to persist at university. However, for many, identifying as a university student is marked with expectations about academic achievement and competence (Jackson, 2003). Not meeting these expectations (e.g. peer, tutor and parental expectations) can contribute to FAF and FSF (Jackson, 2006), suggesting that for a successful transition of students into HE, academic and social integration are crucial (Billing, 1997).

Furthermore, FSF can be exacerbated by the feeling of homesickness (Fisher & Hood, 1987). In their longitudinal study, Fisher and Hood found that homesickness was reported by a significant amount of students amongst which, it was related to an increase in anxiety levels and a rise in depression during the transition. However, the term homesickness is misleading, because during transition, most of students miss their old friends more than their family and home environment (Crissman-Ishler & Schreiber, 2002). Since students leave their friends behind, transition can lead to feelings of anxiety and pressure to find new friends in order to build new peer support networks and replace the old ones (Crissman-Ishler & Schreiber, 2002). Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) further support these claims and point out that finding new friends is crucial because peer networks are important in providing support in times of difficulty such as transitions into HE.

Interestingly, FSF experienced during transition are likely to affect females and males differently. This is because during transition, gender is an organisational feature of forming new student identity; judgements about the self are strongly associated with gender (Jackson & Warin, 2000). This may lead to gender-based practices leading to development of friendships, in-groups and out-groups based on

the gender of the members. Thus, females may associate themselves with stereotypically female groups (e.g. netball players), and males may associate themselves with stereotypically male groups (e.g. football players). Warin and Dempster (2007) argue that gender-based practices during transition help students adapt to new environment and 'fit in' to university life. They also point out that such activities are a temporary phenomenon which enables new students to form peer groups during early stages of transition. For example; some male students in Warin and Dempster's study were found to drink excessively because that gave them a feeling of familiarity and a sense of social belonging. Some students also admitted that the reason for gender-based practices during transition was fear of social rejection and isolation, both of which are risk factors associated with transition to university (Thomas, 2002). However, gender-based practices were found to reduce with time. Students did not need to behave in gender-based ways after the transition because they already formed a sense of social belonging and social identity (Warin & Dempster, 2007). This suggests that over time FSF could also decline.

However, social and academic fears and challenges often clash (Jackson, 2010). Wilcox *et al.* (2005) found that students, who wanted to concentrate on their academic work rather than socialising, were often pressured by their flat mates to 'go out'. Such clashes can lead to struggles in finding a balance between academic work and social life, potentially resulting in FSF and FAF. More importantly, behaviours assimilated by students during the transition into HE, are likely to persist (Earwaker, 1992). If these behaviours consist of constant socialising (Wilcox *et al.*, 2005) and heavy drinking (Warin & Dempster, 2007), they can potentially affect students' academic achievement and attendance, resulting in FAF. This is further highlighted by Gracia and Jenkins (2002) who found that attendance levels of students who passed their course were significantly higher (88%) than of those who failed (69%). Thus, suggesting that over-prioritising socialising can negatively impact on students' academic achievement.

Research Questions

The aim of this project was to take a novel perspective on the process of transition into HE. This was done by focusing on both FAF and FSF to identify some of the social and academic challenges associated with transferring into HE. Taking into account the literature review, specifically the fact that fear has received little focused attention in education literature and that FAF and FSF often clash (Jackson, 2010), two main research questions (RQs) were set:

1. *How are students affected by their potential fears of social and academic failure during transition into higher education (first three weeks of starting university)?*
2. *Do students overcome their potential social and academic fears over time (during their degrees)?*

Under RQ1 and RQ2 it was also investigated whether students find a balance point between the social and academic fears and how maintaining this balance affects their fears. Due to higher incidence of self-reported fears amongst females in secondary schools, stronger effects of BFLPE on females, and the fact that the

performances required to fit into HE are gendered (Jackson, 2003, 2006; Warin & Dempster, 2007), a third research question was established:

3. *Are there gender differences in how students' are affected by their potential social and academic fears of failure?*

Finally, it was decided that a qualitative research methodology would be used. This is because there is a relatively small amount of qualitative research (compared to quantitative), investigating the transition and coping behaviour amongst new students (Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). Moreover, Putwain (2007) noted that qualitative research methods such as interviews are a better alternative to quantitative when investigating fear since they enable researchers to identify causal mechanisms.

Methodology

Participants

Interviewees were recruited using opportunity-snowball sampling (Coolican, 2009, p. 46). They were rewarded for participation with a chocolate brownie. The sample consisted of 12 undergraduate students from a pre-1992, campus university in England. In order to capture gender differences and the effects of time on fears, six (three females, three males) were first year and the remaining six (three females, three males) were third year students (see Table 1 for characteristics of participants).

Materials

Firstly, it was decided that semi-structured interviews would be most appropriate as means of collecting data. This is because interviews are most useful when studying phenomena that cannot be directly observed, such as fear, and there is an interest in how a person feels or thinks (Darlington & Scott, 2002). Drever (1995) points out that semi-structured interviews offer the right balance between structure and flexibility, which makes them an ideal candidate for small scale research. The structure of the interview schedule was influenced by the literature review and to investigate students' experiences of transition, open-ended responses were required. Overall semi-structured interviews were best fit for the purpose and allowed for further probing and prompting if answers needed elaboration or clarification (Coolican, 2009, p. 163).

Secondly, an interview schedule was devised. In order to prevent social desirability and researcher bias, the questions evolved from least to most intrusive (Coolican, 2009, p. 183). Problem items such as leading, double barrelled and impertinent questions were avoided. The questions, probes and prompts used in the interview schedule were largely derived from previous literature (see literature review). Smartphone Sony Xperia with a 'Voice Recorder' application was used for audio recording. The interview schedule was split into four main parts; rapport builder, general questions regarding transition into HE, how students are affected by their potential fears of social and academic failure during the transition and the extent to which students overcome these fears over time. This was done for several reasons. Firstly, before the interview could properly start, it was important to build up

Table 1
Characteristics of participants

Student*	Age	Sex	Degree studied	Year study	of	First to go to university	Educational background	Country of origin	Race/ethnicity
Emma	18	Female	Spanish and Linguistics	1 st		No	Co-educational sixth form	UK	White British
Rachel	20	Female	Psychology in Education	3 rd		Yes	Co-educational sixth form	UK	White British
Jack	20	Male	Psychology	3 rd		No	Boys grammar school	UK	White British
Joel	20	Male	Music Technology	3 rd		Yes	Co-educational sixth form	UK	White British
Lewis	20	Male	Marketing	3 rd		No	Co-educational sixth form	Isle of Man	White (other)
Carla	18	Female	Marketing Management	1 st		No	Small private school	UK	White British
Megan	20	Female	Philosophy and Religious Studies	3 rd		Yes	Girls grammar school	UK	White British
Lisa	20	Female	Psychology and Maths	3 rd		No	Girls grammar school	UK	White British
Andrew	18	Male	Business	1 st		No	Co-	UK	White British

			Studies					
Sam	18	Male	Natural Sciences	1 st	No	educational sixth form Co-educational sixth form	UK	White British
Dale	19	Male	Management	1 st	Yes	educational sixth form Co-educational sixth form	UK	White British
Caroline	20	Female	Psychology	1 st	Yes	educational sixth form Co-educational high school	Hungary	White (other)

*The names of students presented in this table are pseudonyms.

a rapport with the students. This is because rapport between the researcher and students increases the likelihood of obtaining valid findings and decreases the chance of social desirability bias (Coolican, 2009, p. 160). Secondly, in order to start the interview from the least intrusive questions, students were asked some general questions regarding transition into HE.

Since transition is a process that happens over a period of time, it was decided that the first three weeks of starting university would be classed as a period of transition into HE. In the next part of the interview, students were asked to refer back to the first three weeks of starting university. This was done to determine, how they felt during the transition, what they thought were the main challenges of the transition and how did they balance FSF and FAF. Finally, students were asked how they felt at the time of the interview. This was done to establish whether FAF and FSF can be overcome over time and whether students find the right balance between social life and academic work.

To determine whether the interview schedule contained ambiguous and/or leading questions, a pilot interview was carried out to give the researcher a chance to adjust questions before the data gathering process (Coolican, 2009, p. 18). From the pilot interview it was gathered that the interview schedule was appropriate to answer research questions posed and only minimal modifications were required. Thus, qualitative data obtained from the pilot interview was included in the data analysis process.

Procedure

The interviewees were led into a meeting room and asked to make themselves comfortable. The researcher then verbally explained the nature of the study and gave the interviewees the informed consent form to notify them about their rights, study aims and obtain permission to use their data. Interviewees were asked to sign the informed consent form provided that they were willing to agree to participate in the interview. Once the form was signed, the participants were thanked for agreeing to be interviewed and the researcher further emphasized that they would remain anonymous (they would be given pseudonyms) in the transcription process. Furthermore, participants were also informed that if any of the questions were ambiguous or made them feel uncomfortable, they could ask for a clarification and did not need to answer them.

The interview started when the audio recording device was switched on. The researcher made a note of the number, date and time of the interview alongside the name of the interviewee. Then, a short passage was read out loud which further highlighted the nature of the interview alongside participants' rights during the interview. Interviewees were made aware that the interview was to be about the transition into HE, however the word fear was not stated since it could lead to social desirability bias. Following the interview, the participants were thanked for participating, verbally debriefed, and rewarded.

Data Analysis

In order to analyse the data obtained from the interviews, it was decided that a thematic analysis methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006) would be used. During analysis guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke were followed. Transcription was the first stage of thematic analysis which enabled the researcher to familiarize himself with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once the data was read and transcribed, the second stage of thematic analysis began; the data were organised into meaningful groups (generating initial codes). Theory driven and data driven coding approaches were combined. This was done to confirm/disconfirm previous research as well as to create new ideas. The codes were generated using raw data and the most frequently occurring and significant data extracts as identified by previous literature.

After the data were coded, phase three started. This stage involved sorting the most frequently occurring and significant codes into potential themes, and collating relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Candidate themes and sub-themes were developed and the researcher investigated the relationships between them. Once this was done, phase four began. It consisted of reviewing and refining themes and sub-themes. Themes not relevant to the research questions posed were abandoned, whereas others were refined and renamed. Subsequently, the themes were reviewed again to ensure that they cohered together meaningfully and that there was a clear distinction between them. Finally, once all of the themes were named, refined and relationships between them were established, thematic maps were constructed.

Reflexivity

Qualitative analysis is a subjective process during which researcher's perspective affects the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following good thematic analysis practice (e.g. Willig, 2008), personal (how researcher's views and attitudes could have influenced the research) and epistemological (the ways in which research questions and data analysis have constructed findings) reflexivity was acknowledged. The researcher was influenced by previous literature, pre-conceptions of personal experiences of the transition process, and social and academic demands of university life. Thus, some interpretation of the data was inevitable. However, the researcher tried to abstain from generating codes and themes based on 'cherry-picked' information. This was done by generating codes from the most frequently occurring and significant data. Significant data were conceptualised as data which conformed to the themes identified by the previous literature in the literature review. It is important to note, that constituting as significant data by itself was not enough for an extract to be considered a theme; extracts also had to be frequently re-occurring throughout the interviews. For example, independent learning was identified by eight students and previous literature (e.g. Leese, 2010) as an academic challenge, thus it formed a sub-theme. On the other hand formal e-mail writing was identified by just one interviewee as an academic challenge, thus it did not form a sub-theme.

Findings and Discussion

Seven main themes (each with several sub-themes) were identified from participants' testimonies: FAF, FSF, Academic Challenges, Social Challenges, Coping Strategies, Personal and Academic Problems and Gender Differences.

General Questions Regarding Transition into HE

Although not directly relevant to the research questions, it is important to introduce the data with demographic information. Firstly, none of the students who were interviewed had vocational qualifications. They all attended Sixth forms or grammar schools where they studied academic subjects. Secondly, five out of 12 students stated that they were the first in their families to go to university. Thirdly, the majority of students thought that FE was different to HE (e.g. Andrew). They stated that this was because FE was smaller than HE, more structured than HE, did not require as much independent learning and that there was more freedom of action in HE. These findings conform to previous literature and recent research by Denovan and Macaskill (2013).

“Andrew: No it’s much different, you kind of get spoon fed when you are at sixth form. Teachers help you out a lot more, uni is much more independent.”

Moreover, just like Jackson (2003) reported, the majority (10 out of 12) of students placed academic and social expectations on themselves upon coming to university. Sometimes they presumed that having expectations in one would impact on the other, this was demonstrated by Rachel.

“Rachel: Yeah, I wanted a first. But I was scared that I won’t make any friends.”

RQ1. How are Students Affected by Their Potential Social and Academic Fears of Failure during Transition into HE?

Themes: FAF, Academic Challenges and Coping Strategies

The majority of students (10 out of 12) reported that they experienced less academic pressure during the transition into university than at their FE institution. One student reported that she experienced the same amount of pressure and the only student who stated that she experienced more academic pressure during transition was an overseas student. This was unsurprising considering that Lowe and Cook (2003) also found that only 20% of students thought that academic pressures were worse than expected.

“Carla: I would say academically less pressure cause where I was before was very, very pressurised. They wanted A’s and A it was very much league tables, league tables. Whereas here you don’t even have to turn up to lectures. No one even monitors your attendance and knows.”*

The low academic pressure was reflected in the amount of workload students felt they had during the transition. Once again, only two students found the workload to be less demanding at FE. The two exceptions were a maths student and an international student who struggled with the workload but ‘dealt with it’. This conformed to previous research by Cambridge University’s International

Examinations Unit which found that in 2011 only 11% of students reported they could not deal with the workload.

“Megan: It was a lot less than the homework that you get and the coursework that you got to do at sixth form”

Transition was found to positively affect the majority of students' (seven out of 12) ability to form social relations. However, concomitantly it negatively affected ability of six students to do academic work. Students such as Lisa, reported academic challenges such as disappearance of BFLPE, and some also felt less academically competent. This was supported by Jackson (2003), who found that many students after experiencing the shift of BFLPE during transition into HE, reported decline of ASC.

“Lisa: Yeah, I now think I'm a lot more like... average (laughter), bit more stupid and disabled.”

Students also reported that the transition affected their ability to manage their time. Nearly all of them did not manage their time effectively and most prioritised socialising over academic work. This was demonstrated by Sam and could have been related to FSF, low academic workload and difficulties in adjusting to university's teaching methods (Macaskill & Taylor, 2010).

“Sam: Probably not, I would say first three weeks it was more about social like going out and stuff rather than focusing on my workload.”

Moreover, students reported many academic challenges during the transition into HE. Some of the most frequently described involved: coping with independent learning, note taking, getting used to how the lectures work, assignments, academic reading, choosing the minor and coping with disliked minor subject. The majority of those challenges were identified by previous research (Yorke, 200b; Yorke & Longden, 2008; Germeijs *et al.*, 2012; Bingham & O'Hara, 2007; Leese, 2010).

“Dale: (Emmm), I found coping with independent learning difficult, I found like concentrating in lectures difficult, I just found difficult to keep up with him for 50 minutes, goes quite fast.”

Some students such as Megan liked independent learning due to the freedom it offered. However, many (eight out of 12) identified it as one of the academic challenges brought about by the transition. This is because independent learning was classed as a new experience, which was hard at first, required self-motivation and could have been experienced as overwhelming at the beginning of university. A few students who were used to 'spoon-feeding' in FE found independent learning particularly hard.

“Rachel: (Emm) at first I found it quite hard because I didn't really know what I was doing. And cause you're like spoon-fed at school and college your used to being told what to do. But then at uni they just said do whatever you want and it was like (Emm)... I found it hard to know what to do to.”

This was supported by previous research where it was found that a significant proportion of new students struggle with independent learning and many have difficulty adjusting to university's teaching methods (e.g. Macaskill & Taylor, 2010; Leese, 2010; Lowe & Cook, 2003). Interestingly, the only student who came from an independent school (Carla) thought that she was already a good independent learner.

FAF had both positive and negative effects on students' motivation to work. Although they made some students (seven out of 12) feel nervous and worried, they also motivated them and made them more determined to work. Interestingly, just like in secondary schools (Jackson, 2010), FAF at university also made some students' fear parental reactions to failure (e.g. Andrew). This in turn resulted in practices to prevent academic failure such as last minute work. Overall, these findings suggest that although FAF were prevalent during the transition into HE, they were not always bad. This has also been supported by De Castella *et al.* (2013) who found that success-oriented students were much better at dealing with FAF than others. Furthermore, in their study, students who were success-oriented and low to moderate in FAF, reported highest overall academic achievement. Therefore, it seems that amongst some students (e.g. Rachel), FAF actually served as a motivator to do academic work. This could explain why some of the students (seven out of 12) in the current study were motivated to work despite FAF.

“Andrew: Yeah, made me a bit worried, made me more motivated, thinking about failing. Cause my mum and dad would rip my head off.”

“Rachel: Yeah, if I was worried that I wasn't gonna do that well, then I did more work. That was usually last minute so I already had all the like social time.”

Themes: FSF, Social Challenges and Coping Strategies

The majority of students (nine out of 12) reported that transition into HE affected their behaviour during social situations. Amongst other reasons, the nine students stated that they had to 'fit in' to student stereotype, were often persuaded to 'go out' and some felt pressured to go clubbing (e.g. Lewis). This resulted in some students such as Joel, feeling nervous potentially due to FSF. These findings are not surprising considering the fact that social support, establishing friendships and a sense of belonging play a key part in successful social transition (Brooman & Darwent, 2013; Lowe & Cook, 2003). The pressure to succeed socially can thus result in gender-based practices such as clubbing (Warin & Dempster, 2007), which may be aimed at establishing friendships and preventing FSF.

“Lewis: Peer pressure maybe or you might not be one of the guys if you don't go.”

The additional subthemes of social challenges which were identified during transition included: constant socialising, making friends outside of the house, peer pressure to go out, lack of support network (international student), moving in with strangers and getting into sports teams. Some students (e.g. Rachel) also reported that not looking stupid in social situations and adapting to new environment was challenging. This can be seen as both academic and social challenge which may potentially result in both FSF and FAF. The fear of looking incompetent in front of peers was also

prevalent amongst secondary school pupils in Jackson's (2006) research. Thus it may be the case that it transferred from FE to HE.

"Rachel: (Emmmmm) not looking like an idiot in front of my friends. Not looking stupid. That was hard (laughter)."

As a consequence of social fears and challenges, students used coping strategies such as spending more time socialising, to potentially reduce the risk of social failure. This is reflected by the fact that all of the students reported that they found time to socialise. Moreover, many signed up to clubs and societies (six out of 12). It is thought that doing so increased their chances of forming peer support networks and thus reduced the risk of social failure (e.g. Lewis).

"Lewis: Yeah, in fresher's week we had football trials. So from that I knew I was gonna join that and make my friends through that and that the sort of group that I looked to."

On being asked the question whether interviewees felt that they had a peer group they identified with during transition, the majority (11 out of 12) stated that they did. The one person who didn't was Caroline, the international student, who reported that she didn't feel like she fitted in with her flat mates. Although this can't be established from such a small sample, it might be the case that international students may need to overcome additional challenges to 'fit in' to university life (Schweisfurth & Gu, 2009). Overall however, most of the students were successful in establishing peer support networks which are key determinants of successful transition (Thomas, 2002).

Regardless of all of the academic and social challenges during transition, apart from Lewis and Caroline who were homesick, the majority of students felt happy. Homesickness can exacerbate the challenges and fears of academic and social failure, thus it comes of no surprise that the two students who were homesick were not as happy as the others (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013).

"Lewis: (Emmm) in the first sort of few weeks. I was obviously a bit homesick. But I know quite a lot of people are and it's a bit of a common thing and its sort of came with the minor system. I was a bit upset with and annoyed and it sort of all collided together."

Did Students Balance Fears of Academic and Social Failure during Transition?

Themes: Coping strategies - Coping with Social and Academic Challenges

All of the students prioritised socialising over academic work in the first three weeks of university. The majority reported that making friends was the most important part of the transition. Moreover, students noted that transition was the best time to socialise because it helped them settle into new environment. Eight students said that socialising made them feel comfortable and happy. Some, such as Megan, also reported that it was important to establish a 'social basis' in order to have someone to rely on when struggling. This could be linked to FSF and suggests that at the

beginning of the transition, FSF may be stronger than FAF due to low academic pressures.

“Megan: Because if you don’t make friends at the start then you’ve got nothing to go on for the rest of your three years. It’s so important to have that social basis... that group that you can identify with. Because they are the ones when you struggle later that are going to support you...”

However, prioritising socialising during transition had a negative effect on 10 students’ academic work. Some students (e.g. Andrew) did less work than others and missed lectures because they have ‘gone out’ the night before. In Warin and Dempster’s (2007) study this was typical gendered behaviour of males performed to ‘fit in’ with the rest of the students and establish a sense of belonging to university.

“Andrew: (Mm) it’s more just going out on a night out, waking up the next morning thinking “I’ve got a lecture at 1 o’clock should I go? No I’m hung-over”. Missing lectures, missing seminars like that.”

Due to the fact that the majority of students prioritised socialising over academic work, academic work did not impact on their social life. This was surprising considering the academic demands posed on students to become independent learners (Leese, 2010). On the other hand, the two students who reported that academic work impacted on their social life, felt isolated and lonely, they had to do academic work when everyone else was having fun socialising. This had implications on their social life, as Goleman (1996) pointed out, prioritising academic work over socialising can result in feeling alone and isolated.

“Joel: (Emm) yeah a bit. Sometimes I was secluded in my room so I suppose.”

The academic and social challenges brought about by the transition had mixed effects on students’ feelings of control over their work. Seven students felt that they were in control of their work, whereas five reported that they were not. Those who reported that they did not feel in control, cited reasons such as panicking before an essay, having ‘too much going on’ and struggling to find the right resources (independent learning). These reasons could have further fuelled their FAF.

“Dale: So everywhere is like in different places, you got to get different stuff, everything... I just hate everything being online, I just rather like... small textbook with like questions in and you know where to go rather than having to do all the random stuff.”

Although some students tried to balance academic and social life during the transition, the majority admitted that there was a focus on social life rather than academic work. This resulted in social life clashing with and affecting academic work. Even so, in retrospective some students reported that they wished they had spent more time socialising on the basis that first year did not count. This was the case with both first and third year students.

“Lisa: Because like looking back it was so easy and you didn’t have to actually do much work. Like you only needed 40% so like, what’s the point of trying to get 80% when you can just get through the same with 40%.”

On the other hand, six students did report that although they prioritised socialising over academic work during the transition, they felt like they balanced the two effectively. This is also reflected in Jackson’s (2006) research on FSF and FAF in secondary schools. Although some pupils chose to misbehave in lessons, they were ‘clever enough’ to do the work and revise when it mattered (before exams). This suggests that these coping mechanisms could have shifted from secondary education into HE and may have assisted students in the current study.

RQ2. Do Students Overcome Their Potential Fears of Social and Academic Failure over Time?

Themes: FAF and FSF, and Academic and Social Challenges over Time

The majority of students (nine out of 12) reported that they felt better about their university experience at the time of the interview than at the beginning of the transition. This supports O’Shea’s (2013) findings that FAF can decline over time, and suggests that it may also be the case with FSF. Students stated that at the time of the interview they felt less nervous, happier, relaxed, settled in, more comfortable and confident. Moreover they also noted that there was less pressure to socialise. In many cases (e.g. Sam), this was because they have already established peer support networks during the transition.

“Sam: (Emmm), feel a lot more comfortable here now. Like its beginning to feel like home, if you know what I mean.

Researcher: So do you feel less or more nervous about being in this environment?

Sam: Yeah I don’t feel nervous at all no. Compared like... the first few weeks there is obviously still few nerves. But now I’m just completely relaxed.

Researcher: What made you change your views?

Sam: Think it’s just you get used to it, like it’s just acclimatise and obviously now I know quite a lot of people around the area so got a lot of friends, got a lot of people to talk to. Just feel... it just doesn’t feel like strange new environment anymore.”

On the other hand, three students felt worse about their university experience at the time of the interview as opposed to during the transition. This was especially evident with a first year student Andrew who reported that academic work was getting overwhelming. Also third year student Lisa stated that she was unhappy due to an increase in academic workload which prevented socialising. The academic pressures felt by these students could have potentially exacerbated their FAF and they may have channelled their fears into increased effort and academic study (De Castella *et al.*, 2013).

“Lisa: (Mmmmm) There is a lot less social. It’s a lot more just work. I spend all my time just looking at computer screen rather than like socialising with people. It’s not as enjoyable.”

All of the students but Caroline (international student) reported that at the time of the interview they felt like they had a peer support network. Whether it was through an association with friends from a sport team, course friends or flat mates, it made them feel more comfortable and safer (e.g. Carla). This suggests that through gender-based practices during the transition into HE, students adapted to university life and managed to establish peer support networks (Warin & Dempster, 2007). As described by Thomas (2002) establishing peer support networks would have reduced the FSF, loneliness and isolation.

“Carla: It makes me feel a lot like safer kind of, like if I get into trouble I have people to turn to.”

Moreover, eight students reported that their academic self-competence levels have changed since the transition into HE, and six students thought that theirs had improved. The six students who reported that they felt more academically competent got better at researching, essay writing and note taking. This could explain why in O’Shea’s (2013) study FAF declined over time, students might have simply got better at academic work.

“Joel: (Emmm) well I was awful at writing essays at the start I remember. Now I’m all right kind of confident, not too bad.”

The vast majority of students (11 out of 12) felt that they were motivated to learn at the time of the interview. The main motivators included: FAF, having an interest in the subject studied, prospect of obtaining a well-paid graduate job and grades. This demonstrates that some students were likely to be success-oriented, and it may explain why for some of them (seven out of 12) FAF increased motivation to do academic work (De Castella *et al.*, 2013).

“Researcher: What motivates you?”

Andrew: Yeah, kind of, academic failure and academic success. Everyone likes to do well.”

Concomitantly, eight students felt that they were on track to meet their academic and social expectations that they set for themselves at the beginning of university. This in turn resulted in happiness, possibly from balancing/overcoming FSF and FAF. FSF may have been overcome with the establishment of peer support networks at the beginning of university (Warin & Dempster, 2007) whereas FAF could have been overcome with good academic record (O’Shea, 2013).

“Lewis: Yeah I got a middle 2i in my second year and I think my skills and abilities of essay writing in what sort of markers are looking for... it’s really starting to make sense. So I reckon I will still be on track for a 2i.”

The students who expressed that they did not feel like they were on track to meet their academic expectations were in the first year of university. Thus, at the time of the interview they may have still not gotten used to university’s teaching methods and independent learning (Leese, 2010, Macaskill & Taylor, 2010). However, they had a lot of time to meet their expectations and remained optimistic.

Sub-theme: Academic and Personal Problems

It was also found that at any time of being at university academic and personal problems had negative effects on and could have exacerbated FAF and FSF. As stated by Lisa, if something went wrong in one aspect of students' life, it affected the other aspects. Academic and personal problems made students feel anxious, homesick, impacted on their academic work and had negative effect on their university experience.

“Lisa: I think like, if something is gone wrong in one aspect of your life it tends to make everything else decrease in value as well.”

Did Students Learn to Balance Fears of Academic and Social Failure over Time?

Themes: Coping Strategies - Coping with Social and Academic Challenges over Time

At the time of the interview ten out of 12 students reported that they have learned to balance academic work with social life better than they used to during the transition into university. Furthermore, as the workload intensified, students started to prioritise academic work over social life. Five interviewees also stated that there was less pressure to 'go out'. This could have had the positive effect of lowering FSF and resulted in less socialising than at the beginning of university. Students stopped missing lectures and spent more time doing academic work, suggesting that academic work became more important than socialising (e.g. Megan). However, this shift in priorities could have also been caused by the fact that peer support networks and friendships were established during the transition, thus at the time of the interview FSF and gender-based practices to 'fit in' could have stopped or declined (Warin & Dempster, 2007). On the other hand, academic pressures placed on students to succeed (Robotham & Julian, 2006) could have exacerbated FAF and some students may have channelled their FAF into increased academic effort (De Castella *et al.*, 2013).

“Megan: Better, it took practice to get it right but I think it's... I think I've got it spot on now.”

Researcher: Do you prioritise one over another?

Megan: Academic work over social life because at the end of the day I came to university to get a degree. I want a good degree because I don't want to pay the money I have and put the effort in that I have to come out with a bad degree.”

The two students who reported that they could not balance academic work and social life effectively blamed lack of time for social life. However, the lack of time could have been caused by academic demands which may have exacerbated FAF, resulting in students spending most of their time doing academic work to avoid implications of failure (De Castella *et al.*, 2013). This was evident with third year mathematics and psychology student Lisa.

“Lisa: Worse. It's more just academic and no social.”

Researcher: Why?

Lisa: Because it feels like for third year, you've got to have everything under control and you always got to be on top of your work and there isn't much time for social."

Unsurprisingly, all of the third year interviewees reported that focusing on academic work impacted on their social life. They started to prioritise academic work over socialising potentially due to FAF caused by an increase in academic workload. Interestingly, first year students were less likely to state that academic work impacted on their social life (e.g. Dale). This could have been caused by having lower workload than third year students and the fact that first year grades do not count towards final degree classification. Thus, it may be the case that in the first year of university academic pressures are not strong enough to cause significant FAF. Therefore rather than learning to overcome the two fears, students may learn to balance one over another when required, e.g. FAF over FSF when academic pressure intensifies.

"Dale: (Emmm), I don't know because I've not done too much work at the moment but I think if I did, if I did do work, it would impact on it because it mean like... I'm sure it probably will as the years go on and you have more work to do. But right now I feel as thou it's all right."

Regardless of the fact that most of the students reported that they balanced academic work and social life better than they used to at the time of the transition. The thought of balancing the two spheres made them anxious. This was especially the case with third year students who reported that they had a lot of academic work and social commitments which they had to meet. Some students reported that this made them less motivated to work. Moreover, like in Jackson's (2006) research in secondary schools, students feared getting the balance wrong and that getting it wrong would increase the risk of academic failure (e.g. Jack).

"Jack: (Emm) not... (Emm) yes in that I'm worried that I will get the balance wrong and spend too much time socialising and not enough time working and that I will academically fail and not come out with the grades that I wanted..."

Upon being asked the question of what could help students balance academic and social life at university, no common themes were identified. As pointed out by Andrew, everyone is different, thus it would be challenging to help everyone. However, students did state that socialising and making friends was important and that socialising should be prioritized during the transition. Moreover, some mentioned that during the transition more contact hours with academic staff should be provided to aid the development of essay writing skills. One student who previously reported being unsatisfied with the minor system also thought that students should be made aware of the minor system prior coming to university.

"Andrew: For me the thing that would help me would be more one to one with academic staff. But it's different for everyone so I don't know."

Finally, regardless of all those challenges and fears brought about by the transition to university, all of the students reported feeling happy at the time of the interview. Furthermore, they also stated that they felt happier than at the time of the transition. The key factors of students' happiness were: having friends, doing well socially and

academically, having an interest in their degree, independence and freedom of action. This suggests that over time students get better at balancing FAF and FSF.

RQ3. Gender Differences

Transition may result in gender-based practices to establish friendships and 'fit in' to university life (Warin & Dempster, 2007). Moreover, Jackson (2003) found that BFLPE disappearance had gender-based self-reported effects during transition into HE. Therefore, based on the previous research, gender differences were expected.

The findings of the study seem to support Jackson and Warin's (2000) notion that gender is an organisational feature of forming new student identity. As suggested by Warin and Dempster (2007), during transition male students often associate themselves with stereotypically male groups such as college football team, whereas girls associate themselves with stereotypically female groups, e.g. college netball team. This association was evident throughout most of the interviews and it seemed to influence the friendship groups of the interviewees. All of the students who joined stereotypically male/female sports teams during the transition into university, formed friendship groups within these teams. This was highlighted by third year students such as Lewis, suggesting that gendered friendship groups which form during the transition into HE may persist and serve the purpose of a support network throughout the university. For example, Lewis joined a football team in the first year of HE and this shaped who he identified with throughout most of his university life.

“Lewis: Yeah I would say like being part of County football is definitely one of those groups and then living with good five, well four of my mates is definitely another sort of extra group, although we are all sort of involved in the football.”

There is also evidence to suggest that gender-based practices decline over time (Warin & Dempster, 2007). This was evident amongst male students who reported that after the period of the transition into HE, there was less pressure to 'go out' and socialise. This may have been influenced by the fact that for most of the students the workload intensified after the transition into HE, thus they had to gradually stop prioritising social life over academic work to avoid academic failure. Moreover, some students reported that they made friends during the fresher's week and thus, they were under less pressure to socialise since they already had peer support networks. This suggests that gender-based practices could be performed to form same-sex peer groups which could act as support networks during transitions into new environments.

“Jack: I guess there is no pressure from the social side of my life to socialise, there is just my internal want to want to go and socialise which I can't do cause I have so much work now.”

Interestingly, BFLPE disappearance, albeit reported, did not affect the ASC of the majority of males. Five out of six females and four out of six males, reported the disappearance of BFLPE. However, only the females (and one male) reported that it had negative effects on their ASC. By the same token, males were less likely than females to report that they had experienced social challenges, academic and/or personal problems during the transition into and throughout the university. On the

contrary, they were more likely than females to state that they had a peer support network. According to Jackson (2006) these differences could be the result of dominant social constructions of masculinity and femininity in the society. This is because, females may be expected to show emotions (e.g. fear) and may be perceived as more emotionally fragile than males. On the other hand, males may act in accordance with their gendered social norms and thus may be less likely to admit to having emotional, social and academic struggles during the transition (Jackson, 2006). Thus, they may be less sensitive to the disappearance of BFLPE than females. In other words, the disappearance of BFLPE, may affect males' ASC less than females' ASC.

Moreover, males were more likely than females to report that they were on track to meet their academic expectations. This could be due to the fact that males might be more confident about their academic abilities than females (Jackson, 2003), and/or that females are more likely than males to report fears (Jackson, 2010). It may also be the case that, females could be more inclined to be honest about reaching their expectations. For example, a third year male student Jack did not meet the academic expectations he had set for himself when he came to university. Nevertheless, he still stated that he met his social and academic expectations because his priorities have changed.

“Jack: Yeah, definitely. I think, I think I’m gonna come out with a 2i. But like I said that’s cause my priorities changed from wanting to really drive and get a first to actually I think I will go for a 2i and make a lot of friends and have a good time.”

However, gender differences could have also been caused by the fact that the majority of males who were interviewed knew the researcher. This in turn may have influenced their responses. Expressing emotions may be perceived as stereotypically feminine practice (see Jackson, 2010). Males who engage in stereotypically masculine activities such as playing football, may or may not strive towards the most desired configuration of masculinity (hegemonic masculinity, see Connell, 2000, p.10), which may be incompatible with talking about fears (Jackson, 2010). Thus, although anonymity was provided, males in the current study might not have wanted to disclose their fears to avoid being perceived as less masculine by their male friend who was interviewing them.

Conclusion

The transition into HE involved significant academic (e.g. independent learning) and social (e.g. pressure to 'go out') challenges. Moreover, it is suggested, that FAF and FSF continued from school (Jackson, 2006) to HE. Many students found balancing those fears difficult. This was especially the case with FSF which were exacerbated by social challenges at the beginning of the transition. This led to coping strategies which involved gender-based practices (Warin & Dempster, 2007), and prioritising socialising over academic work to 'fit in' to student stereotype and establish a sense of belonging. FAF were also prominent throughout the transition process and enhanced by academic challenges such as adjusting to university's teaching methods (Macaskill & Taylor, 2010). However, not all students were equally affected, e.g. Carla who came from an independent school reported that she was already an independent learner before coming to university. Although FAF made students

nervous and worried, as De Castella *et al.* (2013) found, amongst some students, FAF also served as a motivator to do academic work. Albeit 10 out of 12 students (during the transition) reported feeling happy, the two who did not blamed feeling homesick. It can therefore be argued that homesickness may exacerbate the negative effects of FAF and FSF. This is supported by recent research of Denovan and Macaskill (2013) who found that homesickness was a common response to transition which negatively affected adjustment to university.

The importance of friends and peer support networks during the transition was reflected by the fact that all of the students prioritised socialising over academic work during the transition to university. As Thomas (2002) points out, peer support networks are key determinants of successful transition, and social failure could result in feeling alone and isolated (Goleman, 1996). Therefore, it seems that FSF were stronger during the transition than FAF. Although FAF and FSF sometimes clashed, half of the students felt that they balanced the two spheres effectively during the transition. This ability could have transferred from secondary schools where academically brighter pupils balanced FSF and FAF by misbehaving in lessons to appear 'cool', whilst at the same time revising when it mattered to prevent academic failure (Jackson, 2006).

Over time, the majority of students reported feeling better about their university experience, compared to how they felt at the beginning of university. It seems that once peer support networks were established, the pressure to socialise declined and so did gender-based practices (Warin & Dempster, 2007). This allowed students (especially third year students) to tackle the increasing academic pressures and FAF by investing more time in academic work. As a result, at the time of the interview, the majority of students reported that they were on track to meet their academic and social expectations they set for themselves at the beginning of university. Moreover, the majority of students reported that they were better at balancing FAF and FSF at the time of the interview as opposed to at the beginning of university. On the other hand, the two who thought the opposite blamed their failure on academic demands which prevented socialising. The academic demands could have exacerbated FAF and could have led the two students to channel their fears into increased effort and academic study to avoid academic failure (De Castella *et al.*, 2013).

Gender differences were also present. They were attributed to dominant social constructions of masculinity and femininity in the society (Jackson, 2006), which may result in males being less sensitive to the disappearance of BFLPE and more confident about their academic abilities (Jackson, 2003; Jackson, 2010). On the other hand, these gender differences could have been the result of the sampling method used to gather participants. Many male interviewees have known the researcher and were part of a college football team. Thus, it may be the case that their responses were influenced by this relationship and made them less likely to talk about their fears. Furthermore, being part of a football team may have exacerbated gendered expectations placed upon them by the society to appear as one of the 'lads' and act in stereotypical gendered behaviours (Warin & Dempster, 2007). This pressure in turn could have resulted in social desirability bias.

The study also had several limitations. Firstly, students were asked retrospective questions thus, the researcher was reliant on their memories of events which could

have been inaccurate and could have harmed the study's validity. This was more likely with third year students who were asked about their experiences before and during the first three weeks of university. Secondly, due to the fact that the researcher experienced the transition into HE, the qualitative data analysis might have been influenced by his preconceptions about the process. Thirdly, the interview schedule and the data analysis were influenced by the previous literature. This suggests that the interpretation of results could have also been influenced by the researcher bias, i.e. expectations of matching literature findings in the data. Finally, the sample of the interviewees was not that diverse, raising the question of applicability of the findings to the wider population. It would have been interesting to interview students who came from different educational backgrounds, e.g. vocational colleges.

In summary, students were both positively (e.g. motivation) and negatively (e.g. worrying) affected by FAF and FSF during the transition into and throughout the university. It seems that FSF were most prevalent during the transition whereas FAF were exacerbated by the academic demands imposed on students in the third year of university. Although, balancing FAF and FSF made students anxious, as time went by they gradually got better at it. Firstly, by prioritising FSF and establishing peer support networks during the transition through gender-based practices, and secondly by prioritising academic work to tackle FAF once peer support networks were established. Therefore, the two fears seemed to fluctuate during the transition into and throughout HE. This enabled students to find the right balance and overcome them by prioritising one fear over another when required, e.g. FSF when academic demands were low at the beginning of the transition and FAF when academic demands were high in the third year.

Future research should aim to investigate what could help students such as Lisa who struggle to balance their academic work with their social life. Longitudinal design is recommended to overcome the limitations of the current study. It may reduce reliance on retrospective data and increase the validity of findings. Moreover, a grounded theory (GT) approach could be utilised. By doing so, it is possible that the researcher may be less constrained by the previous literature and there may be a smaller likelihood of selecting information to match the literature. The sample could also be broadened to include more international students and those from vocational backgrounds. This could increase the applicability of the findings to the wider population.

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Further Information

If you would like further information (i.e. appendices including thematic maps), this can be obtained by contacting Michael Ratajczak at michaelratajczak@hotmail.co.uk