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**Exploring first year psychology students' experiences of their transition from pre-tertiary to university education.**

## **Introduction**

### **Background**

Transitioning from pre-tertiary to university education is regarded as one of the greatest difficulties that a student faces in Higher Education (HE) (Bowles et al., 2014). This transition has significant implications for retention and engagement through to graduation (Lowe and Cook, 2003). Facilitating a successful transition for students into degree level study, and acknowledging the subsequent impact it has upon student experience is therefore important for HE practitioners (Brooman and Darwent, 2012a).

Student transition has been defined as *'a significant change in a student's life, self-concept and learning: a shift from one state of understanding, development and maturity to another* (Hussey and Smith, 2010:156). Transition is a multifaceted process with students involved in many transition experiences, not only within educational context, but also in their personal development generally (Briggs et al., 2012).

## **Importance of successful transitions**

A successful transition has implications on a university wide level, as students who experience difficulty during this period are more likely to drop out of their course, thus resulting in financial implications to the university. Tinto's (1975) Longitudinal Model of Drop-Out has been widely acknowledged in the research in helping capture the importance of the first year experience and predicting withdrawal on the course. Tinto (2006) suggests that those that are more likely to persist with their studies are those students whose needs are met early in the course, and who have been given opportunities for engagement in the first year, and where there has been a successful academic and social integration. The developmental model of student adaptation and achievement (Wintre and Bowers, 2007) furthers this argument, taking into account the influence of personal characteristics such as gender and socio economic status on the transition experience of students. Furthermore, Bowles et al. (2014) suggest that students are most likely to make the decision to leave within the first semester of their studies, reinforcing the importance of providing effective support during the transition period.

## **Student expectations of higher education**

One important influence on transition is the student expectation about studying at a degree level within a university. Students' perceptions of this compatibility between school and university has the potential to impact upon their motivation, achievement and success as a university student (Kyndt et al., 2015). When students have more realistic expectations of studying in higher education and take responsibility for their work they are more likely to be successful in their studies (Nicholson, Putwain, Connors and Hornby-Atkinson, 2013).

## **Social Integration**

The need to *belong* and to form new friendships is particularly important during the first year of University (Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie Gould, 2005). Students begin university with an expectation that there will be opportunities to develop social ties (Bogdan and Elliott, 2015; Rubin and Wright, 2014;). Therefore, universities that provide additional support in building social networks for students (Brooman and Darwent, 2014) may facilitate the most successful student transition experiences.

Students want to experience some element of a personalised learning experience that ensures they are able to make meaningful connections between themselves and the university institution, crucial in encouraging retention and success (Palmer, O’Kane and Owens, 2009; Ballantyne, 2012).

This concept of ‘belongingness’ is becoming increasingly important in student research as a ‘predictor of positive academic outcomes’ (Lewis and Hodges, 2015:1).

Developing supportive relationships with staff and peers is crucial in creating a sense of community and in encouraging student success in the first year of study (Brooman and Darwent, 2014). Ensuring there are opportunities to engage both socially and academically is important in developing a community for new students (Vinson et al., 2010).

## **Autonomy and independent study**

A student’s degree of confidence in their ability to work independently will have some effect on their transition experience. Bostock and Wood (2015) acknowledge that some students have a readiness for independent learning, however some often struggle to organise their time and workload. Students are required to adopt a new style of independent learning upon entering higher education in order to maximise their success and transition experience (Christie et al.,

2008).

### **The present study**

With the recent change in fee payments within HE in UK Universities (currently £9000 per annum) there is now an even greater challenge in accommodating student needs and developing interventions to ensure a smooth transition (Woodall, Hiller and Resnick, 2014). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that a new generation of students with a different set of expectations and learning requirements are emerging (Twenge, 2013), questioning the concept of the *traditional student* (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). With a greater diversity within the student population (Hussey and Smith 2010; Torenbeek et al., 2011), a need arises to explore transition experiences within this changing environment.

The aim of the present study was therefore to explore first year students' experiences of the transition to university. A qualitative approach was adopted utilising a focus group methodology involving thirty six first year students, enrolled on courses within the Department of Psychology.

## **Themes**

### **Personal Relationships**

#### *Peer Relationships and social expectations*

Peers formed an important primary source of academic advice as well as more general social support, a finding that reflected a large body of past research and supported the concept of belongingness (Brooman and Darwent, 2014).

We spend quite a lot of time together, especially if we've got like studying or projects to do we'll just do it like in one of our rooms all together, normally, so it's kind of a bit more interesting but then you can almost kind of like, bounce ideas off each other and talk (Lisa).

The main expectation that the participants held was in relation to the social aspect of university. In accordance with the importance of students' social life highlighted in past research (Bogdan and Elliott, 2015), several participants discussed how, prior to starting university, they looked forward to meeting new people and making friends. However, this element of university did not always meet their expectations.

I think that my expectations were I think maybe that you were gonna go out way more and I knew it was gonna be much harder and stuff so it's not below my expectations but.. completely the opposite of what I thought it was going to be (Sally).

As this quote illustrates, the participants were clearly expecting to have a more enjoyable social experience, and to go out more than they did. This could be seen as problematic, given the importance of social support for student retention (Pittman and Richmond, 2008).

#### *Relationships with staff*

In support of past research, a personal relationship with staff was central to the student's experience of university. Hagenhauer and Volet (2014) stressed the importance of Teacher Student Relationships in shaping 'course satisfaction, retention, learning approaches and achievement'. Within the current research, interaction made their classes more interesting, enjoyable and memorable, as well as made staff seem more approachable.

The students repeatedly showed their enjoyment of small group teaching. This enjoyment stemmed primarily from the relationship this enabled them to build with staff, and the confidence this gave them to actively participate in their classes.

I think that some people are really confident and don't mind speaking out.....but obviously, it is easier in smaller groups or when you do know people, you're like amongst friends (Lisa).

Although some students regretted not having a closer relationship with staff, they acknowledged the availability of staff to help and support them outside of classes, as well as their own responsibility to speak out in class in order to facilitate this relationship.

I thought I'd actually get to know the lecturers more and you'd have more of a one-on-one thing before I came, but it's just not really like that. They know certain individuals because they're the ones that speak out a lot, like it's always the same people that talk, so they'll know their names, but no one else (Emily).

In fact, the time spent with academic staff during their first year of study had actually exceeded many participants' expectations.

I thought it was different, I thought lecturers just didn't care about anyone, I thought I'd just come in, do the lecture, and get out. I expected it to be that way but I was surprised they do give a lot of support (Lily).

The expectation that studying at university would be '...serious and just listening to a lecturer talk at you for quite a while and trying to write notes..' (Anna) was not what was experienced. The students were pleasantly surprised that staff were more interesting, less boring and monotone, and more supportive than anticipated. Similarly, the students felt that staff had

‘helped us much more than I thought they would..’ (Vicky) with one participant even suggesting that her University provided ‘..more support here than there was in college’ (Gemma).

Receiving more support than expected, and correspondingly feeling part of an academic community, could explain why students found university more positive than anticipated (Wrench et al. 2014). In general, this theme reflects the findings of Sibii (2010) who stated that the teacher-student relationship was important for a successful transition to university.

### **Autonomy**

This theme encapsulates the enhanced autonomy and independence that the participants had experienced in the transition from college to university. The students valued feeling like an adult but wanted more structure and guidance from staff to successfully manage their academic autonomy. All students mentioned that they knew in advance that university would require them to be more autonomous than they had been at college, with some participants stating that college had prepared them well for this aspect of university life. Thus, this element of their experience met expectations. Despite this, in accordance with prior research, increased autonomy posed challenges for the students (Van de Meer, 2012).

### *Being an adult*

The students valued feeling like adults and being empowered to make their own choices regarding socialising, academic work, finance and living arrangements. This is clear when Gemma says ‘I love university. I love being independent, like I hate going home and seeing my family. I’m like ‘this is so boring!’’ Thus, some students had clearly developed a new independent way of living, which Christie et al. (2008) suggests is essential for successful transition to university. However, the participants acknowledged that this new found autonomy

could be challenging as they had to learn how to manage their time in order to achieve the competing interests of work, socialising and, in some instances, volunteering and paid employment. On this point, one student discussed the difficulty but also the sense of pride that came from balancing work with studying.

To come into Uni now it feels like it's much more work, I've got to combine it with work so it's like the time management is hard cos then you've got to think of your social life which is like I don't have any, I do work erm (laughs) and then do Uni work as well it's just really hard. It's not bad, it kind of like makes you feel like erm, what's the word like I'm actually doing things myself if that makes sense yeah (Emily).

Although Emily sacrificed a social life to complete university work, other students took a more strategic approach to their learning and made decisions as to which classes were 'worth' attending (Vicky). For example, when talking about specific unit lecture attendance, Vicky also states 'well it feels okay to miss a few if you know what I mean, they don't feel as important'. Several participants mentioned that they could be lazy and missed the structure and motivation that parents provided for them. This finding clearly echoes the difficulty of time management found in past research (Van de Meer, 2012).

So I do feel like I have the skills but it's still hard to do sometimes I feel like I get distracted especially with me living with like friends and peers it's not like your parents are there like reminding you to do things it can be quite distracting yeah (Laura).

However, some students cited having high levels of intrinsic motivation, as shown by the quote 'it's just will power' (Joanne) meaning that they had the drive to succeed without lots of intervention from parents. Furthermore, Gemma asserts that doing something they enjoy is its

own motivation; 'I think it helps if you enjoy what you're doing, like here. Like this is completely your choice. You're focussing on what you want to do'.

### *Structure from staff*

The students felt that in comparison to college they had a lot of autonomy over their assignments. For example, Beth states that 'you can write about anything you wanted to instead of just 'this is what you should write about''. Although they valued this freedom, almost all the participants expressed a desire for more guidance and structure from staff. For example, the students frequently mentioned that they were not sure how much reading they should be doing outside of scheduled classes.

Well I actually spoke to my personal tutor, just, it was like a normal meeting but I said 'how much should I be doing?' erm.. because I didn't know if I was doing too little or too much and you don't actually have to do that much but it's enough to keep you working really (Vicky).

Although extensive support is provided to new students (students have access to student support tutors, faculty support officers and are provided with a personal tutor), the interviews indicated that they wanted more contact time with staff and more guidance regarding the structure of assignments and assessment preparation. In addition, the students in two of the focus groups stated that they wanted more formative assignments as they needed deadlines from staff in order to keep them working. This could be due to the common experience of being 'spoon-fed' (Andrea) at college. Interestingly, one participant observed that they felt that it was the College's responsibility to prepare students for independent study. 'I don't think it's University, I think it's more college. They should just give you more independent reading and

stuff to get you through it' (Paul). This theme clearly illustrates the importance of clear, consistent support for students as they develop a new autonomous style of learning (Christie et al., 2008).

Although confidence amongst the participants was reported to be high, a fear of the unknown was a frequently cited barrier to high levels of confidence. The need for 'baby steps' (Caroline) to acclimatise students with the unfamiliar environment was emphasised. For example, the prospect of entering year 2 was reported to be 'scary' (Emily) due to worries that 'the workload may increase' (Joanne) and 'staff support decrease' (Jennifer). This certainly supports past research findings of worry over time management and the difficulty of establishing new ways of working at university (Christie et al., 2008; Rowley et al., 2008; Van de Meer, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

These key themes have important implications for interventions in how best to support students to make a positive transition.

A number of students found the experience of university was more positive than they expected, particularly in terms of the teaching quality and level of support they received. On the other hand, their social life expectations were often not met. Overcoming some of these issues by enabling applicants to university to be more informed of the social as well as the academic aspects of university would be beneficial. A greater emphasis could be placed on encouraging applicants, when visiting their chosen university, to speak directly with current students and staff about the social life expectations. This would provide them with appropriate expectations of the social, and academic aspects of university life.

Many students had a fear of the unknown and were daunted by the prospect of independent study, and tentative about their competencies. This lack of confidence evidenced in some students could be overcome if university courses promoted tasks within teaching sessions that are designed to develop confidence and skills in students, such as group projects and structured assignments with small steps and feedback from formative assignments. These tasks would be beneficial particularly in the first year of study (Fazey and Fazey, 2001; Putwain and Sander, 2014), and ultimately serve to build confidence to maintain a positive transition. Such interventions would also aid autonomy within students who although valued independence, often felt more structure and guidance was required from staff. Interventions that promote the importance of intrinsic motivation would also be beneficial to students managing their transition.

The present study demonstrated that students who felt more positive about their transition experiences identified relationships with their peers as well as staff as particularly important.

Student experiences of transition are varied, multifaceted and often unique to individuals. Nonetheless, from the data generated within the present study three important themes emerged. Addressing any of the issues within these three themes would go some way towards facilitating the transition experience for these students and improving their chance of engagement and retention on their chosen course.

The present study has therefore contributed to the field of exploring transition experiences in the student population in the current climate of change in HE fees within the UK. The students of their era are considered a new generation of students with distinct expectations and learning requirements (Twenge, 2013), and with greater diversity (Hussey and Smith 2010; Torenbeek et al., 2011). The current study has therefore filled a gap in the literature and explored transition experiences with this 'new' group of students in this changing environment. The

implications resulting from this study are relevant to a large number of students themselves and the universities that they attend. Although it would be important to see whether the findings in the current study reflect issues happening in other institutions internationally.

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