‘Duck to water’, or ‘fish out of water’? Diversity in the experience of negotiating the transition to university

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> *“…the normative and the universal discourses of transition do not capture the diversity of student lives, their experiences of university, or of universities themselves”* (Gale & Parker, 2014, p.745).

Educational transitions remain at the forefront of policy and practice in education worldwide (e.g. Hillman, 2005; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Boyle, Grieshaber & Petriwskyj, 2018). Educational transitions are not defined universally, with many accounts using *“taken-for-granted notions of transition”* (Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 737) that draw on homogenised ‘student voice’ data. Thus practitioners require deeper understandings of students’ lived experiences; otherwise, they risk adopting a *“scattergun”* approach to supporting students (Brooman & Darwent, 2014, p. 1523). Exploration of multiple student voices on educational transition is essential to develop a clear understanding of educational transitional processes.

Hearing different voices on transition

Supporting students in successful transitions from school or college to university is a key concern of practitioners, senior managers, and policy makers in Higher Education. Negotiating these transitions is often framed as a ‘challenge’ (Hulme & De Wilde, 2015) with *“potential for*

substantial problems" (Kirkpatrick & Mulligan, 2002, p. 75). A cursory review of the literature in this area reveals a discourse that reinforces students' vulnerabilities and weaknesses, where students (particularly those from 'non-traditional' backgrounds) are described as *"lost in the crowd"* (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007, p. 223), as *"fish out of water"* (Tranter, 2003, p. 1), and where transition is described as a *"challenging hurdle"* (Lowe & Cook, 2003, p. 53) that creates *"special needs"* (Nelson, Kift, Humphries, & Harper, 2006, p. 1). Likewise, an emphasis on developing the resilience, adaptability, emotional intelligence or grit of students to help them to navigate transition (e.g., Pope, Roper & Qualter, 2011; Holliman, Martin & Collie, 2018) may be helpful in understanding the 'challenges', but imply a personal deficit in those students who find transition difficult.

Whilst such terminology raises awareness of the potential difficulties faced by new undergraduates, emphasising transitional challenges could narrow the focus of both practitioners and students to remediation of a problematic experience, rather than preparation for an important milestone. Problematizing educational transitions, by focusing only on challenges, and on specific types of challenge, arguably ignores student diversity, assuming that transition is universally difficult, especially for those with 'vulnerable' characteristics. In reality, whilst early experiences of university can lead to many students feeling adrift, the notion of transition as a 'struggle' is a far cry from the experience of others. Some take to university like a 'duck to water'; the process of adjusting to university life can be positive, with exciting opportunities to make new friends, try new activities, and develop a new identity (Devlin & McKay, 2014). Even challenging early experiences of university can facilitate, rather than hinder, transition:

> *"…transitions can lead to profound change and be an impetus for new learning, or they can be unsettling, difficult and unproductive. Yet, while certain transitions are unsettling and difficult for some people, risk, challenge and even difficulty might also be important factors in successful transitions for others."* (Ecclestone, Biesta, & Hughes, 2010, p. 2)

This is critical, as homogenising the transition experience as a difficult period in time where we need to protect students from negative emotions might dilute the impact of the transition period as a 'rite of passage' (see Tinto's 1988 seminal work on transitions). A strong focus on "bridging the gap" of transition might lead to ignorance of the possibility that the gap is important; it should be experienced and lived, rather than 'bridged'. Experiencing the disequilibrium of finding oneself adrift in an alien university environment (e.g. Jackson, 2003) may not be a problematic experience that we need to protect students against, but an essential part of their development and growing independence. Indeed, the concept of transition as a component of transformation and enhanced learning is well recognised within the higher education literature. Meyer and Land (2003, 2005) describe students' transition from a lack of understanding to a state of deep understanding, via 'threshold concepts', by which they mean the process of acquisition of new and difficult knowledge. In making the transition from their previous state of learning (pre-university) to an advanced level of thinking about their discipline, Meyer and Land suggest that students pass through a 'liminal' or transitional space, which can be uncomfortable and troublesome, while they struggle to cross the threshold to their new, transformed state of understanding. The liminality, and associated struggle, are essential

components of learning, akin to growing pains; without them, students' understanding cannot be transformed. The transition to university for some students may thus be framed as a watershed, transformative experience, rather than a problematic one.

Heterogeneity in students' experiences of transition undoubtedly arises from variability in students' backgrounds, expectations, and experiences:

> *"Learning is not just about how students meet the requirements demanded of them at specific point in their academic career, but is embedded in the totality of their prior learning experiences"* (Christie et al., 2016, p.480).

To explore the influence of prior learning experiences on the transition to university, we now report two approaches that draw upon students' voices as collected through our own research projects.

Students' Expectations of University

Many scholars have identified discrepancies between students' expectations of the university experience, and what they encounter during the initial stages of their undergraduate journey (e.g. Smith & Hopkins, 2005; Tranter, 2003), where *"experiencing a gap is the rule, not the exception"* (Holmegaard, Madsen & Ulriksen, 2016, p. 169). Unrealistic expectations may be problematic, as a discrepancy between expected and lived experiences of university can detrimentally affect academic engagement (Rowley, Hartley, & Larkin, 2008). Thus, we must consider individual expectations of university life, and how these personal beliefs relate to the lived experience of the transition.

Balloo (2017) used Q methodology to explore differences in students' expectations of university, finding three distinct profiles: expecting to put in the hard work and be supported by tutors; expecting a different experience to high school; and expecting to strike a balance between university and everyday life. These profiles differed, for example, in terms of the expected direct scaffolding from tutors, and interest in the experience of being at university. Balloo concluded that "*there are distinct voices reflecting different profiles of students in terms of what they want from higher education*" (p.9).

It is commonly argued that students from more traditional backgrounds, as a result of their social and cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), may possess greater knowledge about university than their counterparts from non-traditional backgrounds (Scanlon et al., 2007). However, it is important to draw a distinction between 'knowledge about' university, and 'knowledge of' university (Schutz, 1964, p.93). The former represents generalist second-hand knowledge of a particular context, whilst the latter is contextualised knowledge based upon first-hand experience, what we might term 'insider knowledge' (Schutz, 1964). Crucially, whilst some students may possess more 'knowledge about' university, most students are in the same situation with regard to 'knowledge of' university, regardless of their personal background or social and cultural capital (perhaps excepting those undertaking their second degree). Students' 'knowledge about' university, held at the start of the course, may then conflict with their lived experience.

The Theory of Met Expectations (Porter & Steers, 1973), predicts that congruence between expectations and lived experience leads to stronger adjustment to, and satisfaction with, the new environment. Winstone and Bretton (2013) drew upon this theoretical context to explore the expectation-reality gap in the experience of new Psychology undergraduate students. In a

focus group, students discussed their first-year experience, revealing where and how their experience differed from their expectations. One salient area of misalignment related to students' expectations and experiences of independent learning at university. Through their discussions, students revealed that they expected greater explicit direction in teaching methods at university, and the requirement for self-regulated learning was unexpected. This is unsurprising, given that many students report that they expect teaching methods at university to be similar to those experienced at school (Lowe & Cook, 2003), and that they underestimate the amount of time spent in self-directed study (Cook & Leckey, 1999). In Winstone and Bretton's study, students expressed that whilst they knew they would learn in lectures at university, their expectations of lectures were different to their experience. For example, students discussed how lectures were more interactive than expected, but also that maintaining concentration in the lecture setting was harder than anticipated. In the opening chapter, 'Alex' articulated how it was only later in the course that it became clear how best to approach studying at University.

In their analysis, Winstone and Bretton (2013) discussed how students' academic self-concept can be damaged by the 'recalibration' of achievement expectations. For many students, in comparison to grades received at school or college, their early grades at university are perceived to be relatively low. Identities are formed in relation to perceptions of competence (Wenger, 1998), so even the most able students can feel that they are no longer competent as learners, due to the 'learning shock' of disappointment with early grades (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008, p.570).

Jackson (2003) explores this change in learners' self-concept in terms of the 'Big-Fish-Little-Pond Effect' (BFLP; Marsh, 1987), whereby the transition to university involves adjustment from being a 'big fish' in a 'little pond', to being a 'little fish' in a 'big pond'.

Jackson measured students' academic self-concept at the beginning and end of the first semester, and found some evidence of the BFLP effect, whereby the academic self-concept of females, but not males, declined significantly over the course of the first semester.

In a heretofore unpublished study, we explored the BFLP effect by asking 91 Psychology undergraduates to rate on a scale from 1 (not at all confident) to 5 (very confident) their confidence in their ability across a range of academic skills at the start and end of their first year at university (see Figure 1). We analysed these data using paired t-tests and, as shown in Figure 1, students' confidence grew in several domains over the course of the year: note-taking, formatting citations and references according to APA style, avoiding plagiarism, and searching for sources. However, the data also revealed areas where students' confidence decreased significantly, suggesting that students initially expected these skills to be easier than they were experienced to be in reality: maintaining attention in lectures, maintaining attendance at lectures, giving a presentation, and keeping up with course reading.

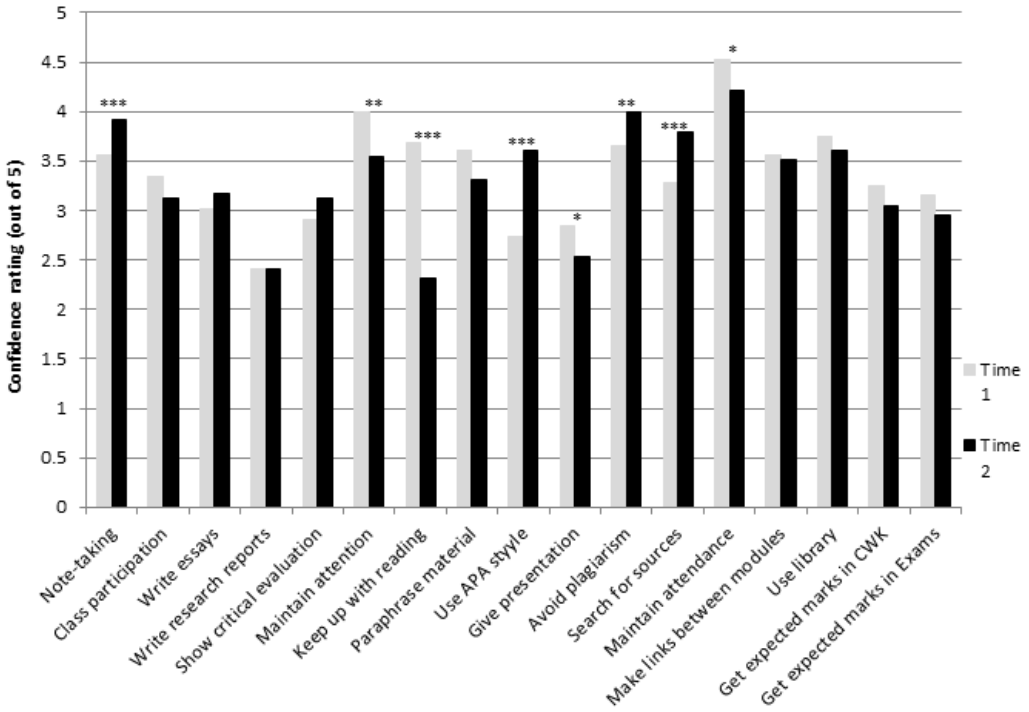

Figure 1. Mean confidence ratings across academic skills at Time 1 (start of year 1) and Time 2 (end of year 1). Paired t-tests: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Through these data, students reveal significant misalignment between expectations and experience, particularly with regard to their own competence, which may influence their identities as learners.

Transitions as a trajectory

As identity is crucial to understanding transition (Holmegaard et al., 2016), it stands to reason that there cannot be a homogenous student voice. Rather, individual characteristics interact with environmental characteristics to create a unique transition experience for each individual. In the opening chapter, we saw how 'Alex' gained his sense of belonging at University not from his

academic peer group, but from his extra-curricular activities. A student-centred approach to transition is essential (e.g. Bowles et al., 2014), in part because students' prior experiences of transition periods can influence their approach to and experience of successive transitions. Whilst practitioners in HE seek to support students in making the specific transition to university, for students, this is the latest in a series of transitions that they have made/will make. In short, taking a lifespan approach, where the transitions within a student's educational journey form an individual 'trajectory', might illuminate important practices that can better support retention and success (Boyle et al., 2018; Hulme & De Wilde, 2015). The nature of this ongoing educational student journey is reflected in Gale and Parker's (2014, p. 734) definition of transition: *"change navigated by students in their movement within and through formal education"*.

When considering the transition to university within a students' trajectory of educational transitions, students' expectations of transition are as important as their expectations of university. The Meleis Transition Theory (Meleis, Sawyer, Im, Hilfinger, Messias, & Schumacher, 2000) argues that successive transitions share common features, such as the presence of new needs, the inefficacy of prior strategies in meeting these needs, and the mismatch between expectations and experience. Additionally, an important enabler of successful transition is a sense of mastery. Placing transitions within a trajectory affords the opportunity for prior experience of transitions to facilitate this sense of mastery during the subsequent transition. Thus, Meleis' theory suggests that it might be beneficial to link educational transitions sequentially. According to Kail (1990, p. 95), *"knowledge allows us to understand novel versions of familiar experiences"*. Supporting students in reflecting on prior experience of

transition when faced with a new transition period might help with the development of a transition 'roadmap' that can guide their behaviour (McMillan, 2013), and reduce anxiety by *"making the future familiar"* (Spalding, 2003, p.289).

Returning to our survey study with 91 Psychology undergraduates, we also asked them about their experience of the transition to university, within the context of the last major transition they made, from GCSE to A Level (in England, this represents the move from compulsory education at 16, to post-compulsory education, from 16-18). During their first week at university, we asked students to rate on a five-point scale (from extremely difficult to extremely easy) their experience of making the transition from GCSE to A level study, and their expected ease of the transition to university. There was a strong positive correlation between these two ratings ($r = .45$, $p < .001$), suggesting that students who experienced a smoother transition from GCSE to A level expected the transition to university to be easier. At the end of the academic year, we asked students two open-ended questions: *"How has your experience of the A level to university transition been similar to your experience of the GCSE to A level transition?",* and *"What did you learn from the GCSE to A level transition that has helped you make the transition to university?"*. We coded students' responses thematically, and here we report their most common responses to the questions.

When reflecting on the similarity between the transition to university and the GCSE to A level transition, many students expressed that both transitions required adjustment to an increase in workload, and an increase in the difficulty and level of academic work. The most common response was that both transitions required them to become more independent as learners. This latter point is particularly interesting given the research evidence discussed earlier, where many students perceive a misalignment between the level of independence required at university and

their expectations (e.g. Cook & Leckey, 1999; Winstone & Bretton, 2013). Even though these aspects of higher education may be difficult for new students, by surfacing their prior experiences, individual students can see that they have previously navigated a similar process successfully, and that there are lessons for each to learn from those experiences that can help them in the new environment.

When considering what they had learnt from the prior transition that helped them transition to university, many students again referenced the need to be more independent and take greater responsibility for their own learning. This suggests that by the end of the first year, students recognised that they were able to use their prior experience of successfully negotiating a transition period to help them in their latest educational transition. Many students also indicated that the transition to university was helped by their learning of time management and organisational skills during their previous transition. Students commonly reported that they had learnt from their previous transition that, although adapting to a new environment may seem difficult at first, perseverance is important because things get easier over time. This is a valuable reminder for students that adjusting to university is not the first time that they may have experienced difficulty within a new environment, but that they managed to adjust before, so can do so again. These findings suggest that new students may benefit from surfacing their experiences of an earlier transition, to remind them of their learning and the strategies that can be deployed within the latest transition period in their personal trajectory.

This might suggest that, rather than offering generalised advice to students on negotiating educational transitions, enabling individual students to recognise the value of previous experience, and to apply their own learning to the transition to university, may be beneficial. In

this regard, students may be facilitated to navigate educational transitions based on their personal, historical 'voices', rather than from the institutional views of a homogenous 'student voice'.

Engaging student voices in understanding transition

In this chapter, we have explored common perceptions of transition as a problem to be overcome, and have argued that such an approach can risk homogenising the experience as one that *all* students find difficult, in similar ways. Yet, the majority of students do not have contextualised knowledge of university, and their initial experiences may conflict with their expectations. We then examined the voices of students themselves, as they emerged through our research. Examining students' expectations in the context of their lived realities provides insight into important dimensions of the transition experience such as self-concept and confidence. Finally, we considered the possibility of placing the transition to university within the context of an ongoing trajectory of transitions. One of the greatest resources that students bring to the process of transition is their own experience of having negotiated prior transitions, and the personal resources and strategies that enabled them to do so. We conclude by offering some recommendations for engaging student voices in understanding transition experiences.

1. *Educational transition is a process, not an event*

Within the literature, emphasis is placed on initial induction periods; equally important is to consider students' ongoing transitions through different stages of higher education (Christie et al., 2016; Nightingale et al., 2013). Engaging with student voices through longitudinal research is critical to this endeavour. For example, in their longitudinal analysis of the transition of non-

traditional students into an 'elite' university, Christie et al. (2016) showed that developing a student identity is an ongoing process, where different struggles are experienced at different times in the university journey. There are also critical points in the university experience where we need to engage with student voices; for example, the transition to the second year of university, where marks typically begin to count towards degree outcomes, is another point where expectations can misalign with experience. This period is represented by the literature on the 'Sophomore Slump' (referring to a similar period in the US educational experience; e.g. Whittle, 2018).

2. A prime audience for student voices on transition should be the next cohort of students

Practitioners can learn much from engaging with student voices on transition experiences, but students' experiences of different stages of university provide crucial information for those about to embark upon the same journey. It is difficult to envisage what university is like until it is experienced (Briggs, Clarke, & Hall, 2012), but sharing 'insider knowledge', reflecting the diversity of knowledge and experiences from different students, is a valuable practice. In Box 1, we present some examples of the advice that our students wished to pass on to the next cohort of students.

Box 1. Examples of advice that first-year undergraduates would pass on to next year's students

- Be organised and develop your time management- buy a diary and actually use it.
- Don't expect super high percentages for marks like in school- it's different. 60s or 70s are GOOD!
- Don't panic about small stuff- if you don't know there is someone who does.

- Get involved- enjoy yourself- it's not just work. Be social.
- Don't compare yourself to other people.
- Don't leave assignments until the last minute.
- Do reading when it is set.
- Attend all lectures and tutorials.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help.

Some of these examples have the potential to counteract areas of misalignment between expectations and experience; for example, whilst lecturers may tell students that marks over 60% are considered good at university, this information is likely to mean more coming from students themselves.

3. The transition to university is one of many transition points

Hulme and De Wilde (2015) argue that the literature focuses heavily on what universities do to support transition, whilst the question of preparatory efforts in pre-tertiary settings has received little interest. Crucially, a co-ordinated approach between pre-tertiary settings and universities is needed if students are to be supported in developing a strong identity as a university student (Briggs et al., 2012; Kitching & Hulme, 2013). Ineffective preparation before students arrive at university can prevent successful transition (Kift & Nelson, 2005), with preparation being seen by some as the 'foremost factor' influencing the success of transition (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998). A focus on the trajectory of transitions through which a student passes encourages collaboration between practitioners at successive transition points, and supports students' reflection upon their own educational journey.

Perhaps the most important factor in engaging student voices in understanding transition is the uniqueness of each student's prior experience. Crucially, *"each student enters university*

with a specific and complex profile which entails specific adaptation to the academic world" (De Clercq, Galand & Frenay, 2017, p. 41). Students' reports of their experiences may be the greatest source of support and information to enable successful transition. Such information is of value to students themselves, to other students, and to those working with students, to make university a fulfilling experience. It is also crucial to involve students in research on transitions; for example, in line with the recent emphasis placed on staff-student partnerships in pedagogic development (e.g. Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2016), students have been included as both researchers and co-authors in work on transitions (e.g. Maunder, Cunliffe, Galvin, Mjali, & Rogers, 2013). Whilst the transition to university may be a key stage of the university lifecycle, it is also one of the most complex, and finding ways to engage the uniqueness of student voices is key to understanding how to facilitate the process, rather than the event, of transition.

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