

The Trials and Tribulations of Transition into Foundation Year Study

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This paper provides a reflective review of activities undertaken to gain an increased understanding of factors influencing successful student transition to a specific integrated foundation year at a UK university. It critically analyses the foundation year students' transitional journey during the 2017/18 academic year and highlights the issues and concerns identified, particularly in response to the student voice. The paper provides an open and honest overview of an institution specific study of systems and processes and their potential contribution to student attrition. It details the challenges faced as the foundation year course team worked collaboratively to plan and manage an improved transition process for the 2018/19 academic year. Interventions outlined here include reviewing and developing admissions processes based upon the student experience, and beginning the process of transition into Higher Education as soon as practically possible through organising activities to promote familiarisation with the campus and the course and building early relationships with the course team prior to enrolment. The importance of an extended induction that balances academic and social integration is also discussed in relation to pre-induction activities that support anticipatory socialisation. The paper emphasises the importance of tailored course and institution specific analysis of transition, focusing on student voice, and recognising the impact of transition on retention and progression.

Introduction

This paper explores the student experience of transition into Higher Education and the impact of transition on the retention and progression of foundation year students. It presents a critical insight into the early weeks of a foundation year course and the enhancements identified to address poor student retention and increase student persistence. Transition to Higher Education has been

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described as “a complex process of development, change and identity shift, in which relationships between individuals and their contexts are inextricably linked” (O’Donnell et al., 2016: 3). It is a “multifaceted process” (Trautwein and Bosse, 2017, 384-385) “that unfolds in stages as the student interacts within the academic, social and institutional contexts” (Cole, 2017: 554). This paper presents preliminary findings from an ongoing study designed to increase knowledge and understanding of the phenomena associated with transition, and its relationship with retention and progression. It recognises that organisational structures can have a significant impact upon students’ academic and social integration (Cole, 2017)—and can contribute to student departure (Tinto, 1993: 3-34)—and presents an analysis of course-level and institutional organisational systems and processes that include admissions, enrolment, induction activities, and selection of modules. The paper also captures opportunities taken to review and reflect as a leader and educator on the transition of foundation year students, and the contribution of this process to their retention and progression.

Foundation year students within Higher Education in England and Wales are defined as individuals who are undertaking a foundation year prior to progressing onto their undergraduate degree and coded as year zero of their programme (HEFCE, 2017). The foundation year has a key role in raising attainment levels whilst preparing students for undergraduate study where they have not been able to meet the usual entry requirements and criteria (Welsh Government, 2016: 2). This paper provides a foundation year case study focusing on the construction of practice in relation to student transition in a way that contributes to the development of institutional policy and an increased understanding of foundation year provision and students in the context of Higher Education. The foundation year course featured here is positioned within a single School and delivers foundation provision across the Faculty. It aligns with the definition of ‘integrated foundation provision’ (Leech et al., 2016: 29). The foundation year is an integral element of nineteen 4 year degrees situated within three main pathways of Humanities, Social Sciences and Business and is facilitated and delivered by a specialist team of staff with expertise in foundation year provision for both home and international students. The course leader has also developed relationships with each of the undergraduate degree course leaders, who are involved in key events and activities during the academic year such as induction and planning and delivery of research projects. Students are required to pass all elements of the foundation year in order to progress to their designated undergraduate degree, with analysis of progression metrics providing a key driver for this review of the transition process and its impact on retention and progression.

The Significance of Investigating Transition, Retention and Progression

The opportunity for institutional change in relation to foundation year provision was driven by a number of factors, including the increasing numbers of foundation year students accessing provision within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs); the associated costs of foundation year provision (Welsh Government, 2016); and the impact of relatively poor retention and progression metrics for foundation year students. Retention and progression metrics at the case study institution showed increasing student attrition rates leading to the 2016/17 academic year. For the foundation year provision discussed in this paper there was a 67% progression rate in 2016/17, with those students who do not progress representing a significant potential financial loss to the institution over the following three-year period. This also highlights the need for improved understanding of factors

affecting student progression on courses that support widening access to Higher Education. Within the current policy climate, HEIs are increasingly challenged to consider these issues and reduce student attrition (Belanger et al., 2002; Winter and Dismore, 2010; Ryan and Glenn 2002; Thomas, 2012; Thomas et al., 2017; Woodfield, 2014). Contemporary issues contributing to this complex discourse include increased student fees, higher student expectations, and a consumerist approach which can potentially impact upon students' ability to engage in Higher Education (Thomas et al., 2017).

An initial analysis of relevant literature identified key factors in relation to student transition, retention and progression. Tinto's (1993) interactionist theory of student college departure utilises a socio-psychological framework to consider interactions between the student and the college environment (Cole, 2017), and encourages analysis of a range of contributing factors, which include the student's commitment to learning, and his/her ability to be integrated into Higher Education. Winter and Dismore (2010) claim that the wider physical and cultural changes that students experience when they progress to Higher Education are key factors for consideration, yet are often ignored. Similarly, this paper rejects the traditionalist approach in which students receive a significant proportion of the blame for not succeeding at university and are often called upon to "change in order to benefit from HE" (Thomas, 2012: 72). Instead, it is important to recognise the complex and multifaceted nature of transition (Trautwein and Bosse, 2017: 384-385). In this respect, Heublein (2014: 511) advocates for the importance of considering individual qualifications and attitudes to studying, in conjunction with an analysis of institutional systems and conditions within Higher Education and the social environment, if there is going to be a significant impact upon student retention and progression.

Other aspects of the literature align with Bourdieu's theories of habitus and capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990); foundation year students, who typically come from low participation areas and possess other complex characteristics (HEFCW, 2016: 4), are often stereotyped as having poor qualifications due to poor educational experience. By contrast, broader evidence suggests that students from lower socio-economic groups do not necessarily have lower rates of success (Thomas et al., 2002). This points to the complexity of the factors which may influence students' success, including their sense of belonging, aspirations and desire to succeed and reinforces HEIs' moral, ethical and, educational duties to increase retention and progression rates for foundation year students on account of the financial, societal and individual student costs involved (Broadfoot, 2012: 1, cited in Thomas, 2012; Thomas et al. 2017). Emergent findings confirm that the reasons students withdraw from Higher Education are often inter-related and there is rarely a single cause (Thomas 2011: 238). Factors include poor preparation for Higher Education; weak institutional and/or course match, resulting in poor fit and lack of commitment; unsatisfactory academic experience; lack of social integration; financial issues; and personal circumstances (Jones, 2008; Cole, 2017). The literature provides evidence of a wide range of initiatives designed to improve retention, whilst also confirming the ineffectiveness of numerous strategies and approaches which can potentially create confusion amongst those involved in retention and progression activities (Reason, 2003).

Despite the array of academic literature on the topic of transition in relation to retention and progression, there is not a one-size-fits-all solution that can reduce attrition. Instead, key themes emerging from the literature include the importance of analysis of tariff scores prior to admission, modes of attendance, employment status whilst studying and the accessibility and utilization of university support systems. Relating these themes to practice (cf. Wilcox et al., 2005; Round et al., 2012) can lead to increased institutional understanding of foundation year provision and students and, in turn, inform and drive change. However, Ryan and Glenn (2002) argue that each institution

must conduct its own investigation to determine the most appropriate resource allocation required to improve retention and progression and inform decision making processes. Taking the analogy of a car: each institution needs to lift up the bonnet to critically examine its engine (Tyler et al., 2009) and conduct a critical analysis of systems and processes that relate to student support and learning experiences. In this way a systems and process driven review approach can improve student support and enhance learning experiences whilst also contributing more broadly to the quality of Higher Education, which, according to Tinto (1993), would naturally increase retention and progression rates.

In addition to the financial losses within HEIs due to poor retention and progression rates, this paper recognises the extent of students' investment—financial and otherwise—into something they hope and expect will significantly transform their lives (IPA Consulting, 2013). Discourse analysis reiterates the significance of Higher Education to social connectedness and the life chances of students in relation to the concept of a 'good society' and this has implications both for students and staff within HEIs (Tinto, 1993; Thomas, 2012; Thomas et al., 2017; Wilcox et al., 2005). Once again, this points to the complex web of factors, roles and responsibilities within Higher Education when it comes to student retention. In response to this, the following section will identify and determine key institutional issues in relation to social and cultural factors that impact on transition and will discuss actions taken to address them.

Responding to Institutional Systems and Processes Issues Relating to Transition

Admissions

The first stage of this process was an exploration and analysis of existing admissions and transition arrangements for foundation year students to determine whether they offered a positive experience, mindful of the importance of removing perceived barriers to entry for foundation year students (Leech et al., 2016). Until 2014/15, foundation year students were informally interviewed during designated recruitment days designed to provide course specific information, gauge student readiness to return to or enter Higher Education, and determine levels of literacy and numeracy. Changes in the university's admissions policy in 2015/16 meant that interviews were no longer a part of this process and decision making took place centrally without direct contact with the course team. This created issues for foundation year staff relating to accountability for retention and progression metrics and ensuring students were sufficiently clear about course requirements. In addition, emergent findings from informal student consultation suggest that the centralised admissions processes were not as clear and effective as they could have been:

“I was not really aware of what course I had enrolled upon”; “I felt information on the website was unclear”,
and “I feel that I would have been more prepared if I'd had an interview before I joined”

Feedback from 2017/18 foundation year students.

Addressing the issues that arose through the removal of interviews was initially difficult due to the current drivers and recruitment pressures within Higher Education, as well as the complexity of university systems and processes and the challenge of offering a distinctive approach to delivery (Leech et al., 2016) based upon the design and delivery of the foundation year. Meetings arranged

with representatives from the Enquiries and Admissions Unit provided a useful insight into the issues faced, followed by associated dialogue on how to address these collaboratively. Due to the nature of the course and its recruitment pattern, it was logistically impossible for interviews to recommence for 18/19; instead, a review of current procedures was undertaken, and issues addressed in response to the student feedback received in 2017/18. The resulting processes, nevertheless, still involved central decision making on the basis of Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) applications, without any input from the course team. Referral to the course team for a telephone interview was possible, but the course team felt that this was not as effective as face-to-face interviews in terms of ensuring appropriate processes for individual students (cf. Priede and Vessey, 2018). The role of the interview in determining students' readiness to engage and make an effective transition into Higher Education remains significant, however (cf. Tinto, 1993). Interviewing Foundation students prior to offering a place could be a key factor in the retention and progression of foundation year students to the extent that Attinasi (1989) encourages the commencement of transition to Higher Education prior to formal entry through anticipatory socialisation. Tinto (1993: 98) argues that whilst this approach may reduce the negative impact of transition into Higher Education, it does not remove the need for a range of ongoing work relating to retention and progression and the importance of additional interventions which respond to a range of complex factors.

Applicant Days

The second stage of this process included the analysis of systems and processes related to applicant days, organized for those students who have already accepted a foundation year offer. These days are a key opportunity for students to come onto campus, meet the course team and gain further insight into their undergraduate degree, informally contributing to anticipatory socialisation and raising student's expectations of what is required of them prior to enrolment. Notably here, foundation year provision within the case study institution is categorised as a 'three plus one' course which meant the foundation year course did not have a designated applicant day, despite recruiting an average of 140 students each academic year (feeding up to 23 undergraduate courses across the university). Appropriate positioning and understanding of foundation year provision and students is critical to institutional practice where foundation year and undergraduate recruitment, marketing, admissions, teaching, learning and student support are integrated in various ways. In this respect, the lack of a designated applicant day for foundation year students represented a missed opportunity for foundation year students to gain an overview of their course, meet the course team, and commence their transition journey, which contrasts with the emphasis on this kind of focused activity within the literature (e.g., Jones 2008; Thomas 2011; Leech et al., 2016). One example of the potential impact of the lack of foundation year specific applicant days is evident in the following piece of student feedback:

“attendance at applicant days might make induction less stressful in terms of finding your way around and knowing what modules you should study”

Feedback from 2017/18 foundation year student.

Tinto (1993: 98) states “that many students withdraw during the first academic year not [due to] levels of integration into the academic community, but more their inability to manage the stresses associated with transition” and the feedback above suggests that the applicant day needed to be

considered carefully in relation to foundation year students' transition and the potential impact of this on their retention and progression.

Actions taken in 2017/18 in response to this involved working in partnership with Marketing and Student Recruitment to organise specific applicant days for foundation year students to ensure parity of provision and provide students with significant information on the course requirements prior to enrolment, encouraging anticipatory socialisation and reducing stress in the transition process. Yorke and Longden (2007) identified that the more information students received about their institutions and courses prior to enrolment, the less likely they were to withdraw. In consideration of these findings, information relating to the foundation year course on the university's website was amended to improve clarity for potential students and work is ongoing in this area.

Induction

The third stage in the analysis of systems and processes designed to enhance student transition and influence retention and progression relates to induction. Yorke (1999: 104) refers to this as an "orientation period in which [students] are inducted into the ways and expectations of HE (which can differ substantially from those of school or access course or from their imaginings from outside the higher education system)". Student feedback indicated that:

"Induction was overwhelming with all students in one room, confusion with modules and a lot to take in"
Feedback from foundation year 2017/18 student.

Actions taken to address student concerns included significant amendments to the induction period for 2018/19. This included the introduction of pre-induction activities to orientate the students and support them to develop a relationship with staff and a sense of belonging to the course prior to induction. These activities involved informal discussion groups and walking tours of the campus with key members of staff. The main induction period also incorporated significant changes with academic aspects of induction being embedded more broadly into the curriculum over a six-week period, which provided students with more time to consider and digest specific elements. Key members of staff from across the university also played an integral part in the induction process by providing an overview of systems and processes that students could use to support their learning, development and academic integration. This helped to provide some balance between the academic and social aspects of induction in the interwoven way suggested by Tinto (1993) and Cole (2017) as a key aspect of supporting student transitions and hence influencing retention and progression. In addition, induction sessions were conducted within key subject areas, which meant that students were not overwhelmed by being together in one room, but were split into smaller groups to support and promote subject identity.

Curriculum Design: Module Choice

The selection of modules during induction week in 2017/18 was also highlighted as having a negative impact on students' transition. Students were required to take two core modules (Study Skills and Investigative Project) and were able to choose an additional four modules from a broad selection of modules which were not directly aligned with their undergraduate degrees. Selection of these modules was not straightforward as students were not confident about what might be the most

appropriate modules and often wanted to change within the first few weeks, presenting a challenge to the university systems and often resulting in students being enrolled on incorrect modules. This created significant issues with some students becoming distressed and anxious because they could not access the correct timetables and module materials. The inability of university systems and processes to manage this process effectively prevented a smooth transition for students, with one of the students explaining that:

“the confusion of module selection made me want to leave”

Feedback from 2017/18 foundation year student.

When consulted specifically on the importance of module selection, 80% of the cohort felt that the process disrupted their studies, with one student saying that:

“module choice was unnecessary and didn’t help with issues at the start of the year”

Feedback from 2017/18 foundation year student.

Further consultation with undergraduate course leaders was undertaken to discuss tailored pathways, provision of an overview of modules, and, along with consideration of student feedback, this resulted in significant changes for 2018/19. In particular, undergraduate degrees were aligned with specific module pathways, which removed the necessity for students to choose their own modules.

Conclusion

This paper provides a critical reflection on the process of transition on to a specific foundation year course and outlines the changes implemented to address poor student retention, and to help improve student persistence into the following year. It includes an analysis of institutional systems and processes relating to transition, considering admissions processes, enrolment, pre-induction and induction activities and the selection of modules. Reflection is provided from staff and student perspectives on the 2017/18 academic year along with the rationale for key changes made for 2018/19. In this way, the paper documents an exploration of transition and its impact upon retention and progression and considers this in relation to a variety of factors in the institutional and wider context of Higher Education. Early indications suggest that changes made for 2018/19 appear to have had a positive impact, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that students are happier, calmer, and more settled at the start of the academic year than in previous years. Staff are also positive about the changes and more confident with the current positioning of students’ academic and social integration. This anecdotal evidence is supported by retention and progression metrics, with pass rates increasing from 72% in 2017/18 to 82.4% in 2018/19. To ensure these changes are effectively evaluated, additional qualitative research, through small student focus groups designed to gain an overview of their transition journey during 2019/20, will be used to investigate the impact upon the student experience

This study represents the beginning of an exploratory journey into the analysis of transition into Higher Education and its particular impact upon retention and progression of foundation year students. Though not all of the issues and responses identified in this paper will be relevant in other foundation year settings and subject areas, the approach taken here may be applicable. Despite the

significant amount of research focusing on transition, there is “no one-size-fits-all approach to improving transition experiences and retention of first-year-students” (Cole, 2017: 549) and there are no straightforward solutions to resolving issues relating to retention and progression (Tinto, 2007). Instead, the findings of this study advocate for a specific, contextual, institutional analysis and approach to the exploration of transition and the retention and progression of students (cf. Ryan and Glenn, 2002; Cole, 2017). In practice, this is an ongoing process, where interventions are tailored to the institution and designated subject areas.

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