Higher Education Academy

TRANSFORMING TEACHING
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Student transition in higher education

Concepts, theories and practices

Victoria L. O'Donnell, Marcella Kean and Gemma Stevens

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Contents

1. Executive summary

This report presents a project carried out at the University of the West of Scotland to explore contemporary theory and research in student transitions in higher education. The report includes a review of the literature on higher education transition, along with data collected about current practice in transition initiatives from a variety of higher education institutions.

The literature to date on student transitions in higher education is underpinned by a lack of clarity and agreement as to what is meant by 'transition', and by a lack of theorising around transition to allow higher education practitioners to move beyond description and evaluation, towards explanation and evidence-based intervention.

The report addresses these two areas through a literature review structured in three sections. These sections review:

> how transition has been defined and conceptualised within the literature to date;
> which theoretical frameworks have been most effectively applied to allow explanations of transition to emerge, and;
> how effective practices in the support of transition have been presented in the literature to date.

The project also gathered information about the contemporary practices of higher education in the implementation of transition initiatives by directly talking to staff involved in such initiatives in a range of Scottish higher education institutions, along with two 'rest of UK' higher education institutions and one international institution. These contemporary practice examples are presented within this report to complement and further inform the understandings developed through the literature review, which encompassed research, theory, and published examples of practice.

The report presents ten key findings in relation to contemporary theory, research and practice in higher education transition, all of which are underpinned by an understanding of transition as a complex process of development, change and identity shift, in which relationships between individuals and their contexts are inextricably linked. This moves higher education away from its traditionally more narrow focus on transition as movement between educational contexts or as a bounded period of time.

Implications of this view of transition are presented for senior managers, for academic and support staff, and for researchers. The report provides clarity and guidance to the HE sector, giving a basis for appropriate actions, interventions, practices and evaluations of transition, and providing directions for future research.

2. Acknowledgements

3. Methodology

This project included a review of the literature on higher education transition, as well as the collection of empirical data about current practice in transition initiatives from a variety of higher education institutions. The researchers undertook a narrative or 'traditional' literature review approach in order to critique and summarise the literature in the field of higher education transition (Hart, 1998). Its purpose was to provide a comprehensive background to understanding current knowledge and thinking in this area, and to highlight implications for current and future practice.

The empirical component of the project adopted a qualitative methodology. Following the imperatives presented by a critical realist perspective (Sayer, 1998), the notion of both the empirical (that which individuals personally experience) and the actual (that which influences experience, but is not directly experienced by individuals), the project set out to gather information about the practices of HEIs in their implementation of transition initiatives by directly talking to staff involved. This served to complement and inform an understanding of the macro-level perspective through the literature review which encompassed research, theory and previously published examples of practice.

For the empirical component, semi-structured interviews were carried out with individuals from nine higher education institutions. Six of these institutions were Scottish, two were English/'rest of UK' and one was international. Four of these nine institutions discussed two different initiatives, so that information was gathered about thirteen different initiatives in total. Ethical approval was obtained from the researchers' institution for the work to be carried out, with consent obtained from each participant. Semi-structured interviews allowed the participants' thoughts, feelings and experiences to drive the interview. Areas that were explored are detailed in the Interview Schedule included as Appendix 1. Such interviews are an accepted part of educational research, and have been used previously in higher education research (e.g. O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007). Interviews were conducted by one member of the project team – either the principal investigator or the co-investigator. Some interviews were one-to-one, where one person from an HEI discussed a transition initiative from their institution. In some institutions more than one individual met with the interviewer to discuss their initiative. All interviews were digitally recorded for later transcription and analysis. Many participating institutions also provided supporting documents or literature about their initiatives.

For the purposes of this report a case study protocol was adopted, in that notes were made from each interview recording and then structured around the key interview themes to provide an illustrative overview of each institutional transition initiative. These are included as Appendix 2. Section 5 of this report provides a discursive overview of how some of these initiatives from current higher education practice relate to theory and concepts of transition uncovered through the literature review.

4. Literature review

4.1 What are 'transitions'?

The literature on educational transition presents a challenge to researchers, policy makers and practitioners alike because of the variety of ways in which the term 'transition' is used and understood. Colley (2007) acknowledges that "it is impossible to arrive at a single definition of transition that might gain consensus" (p428), yet the lack of engagement with this definitional question in the literature means that conceptualisations of transition are often not explicitly articulated. In other fields of study it is commonplace to define terms so that others, who may not necessarily agree or align with a particular definition, can nevertheless understand and engage with what is discussed, based on the definitions presented. This also allows the implications of different conceptualisations for practice to be considered.

This report reviews the literature on higher education transition, with a particular focus on identifying and making explicit, the often implicitly held assumptions about and definitions of what transition means. Alongside this focus on how transition is (implicitly or explicitly) defined and what it means, will be a focus on how the literature theorises how and why transition occurs.

Gale and Parker (2014) note that transition is under-theorised in the literature. This means that in engaging with the literature, even where transition is clearly defined, we are often unable to move beyond the 'what' of transition towards an understanding of the 'how' and the 'why' of transition, which is where the potential lies for influencing and implementing effective practices to support transition. In presenting case studies of transition initiatives from various higher education institutions, this report will illustrate the extent to which definitions and theories of transition implicitly or explicitly influence practice in contemporary higher education contexts.

The literature on transition generally is necessarily broader than the literature on educational transition specifically; and the educational transition literature in general encompasses more than just higher education transition in particular. Transitions generally are of interest to sociologists, psychologists, educators, childhood and youth practitioners, and all of these fields of enquiry have contributed to the literature. This makes for a rich, diverse and varied body of work, and it is hardly surprising that there is a lack of consensus around definitions of transition. Yet as Gale and Parker (2014) point out, there is an overreliance on taken-for-granted concepts and assumptions rather than an explicit alignment with preferred conceptualisations.

Ecclestone (2006) suggests that there are four ways in which transition is conceptualised. The first he terms 'institutional transition' and refers to (for example) moves from one educational context to another, from one occupation to another, or from one structure or system to another. The assumptions within this conceptualisation are about the individual making the transition, and their role in it, where responsibility lies firmly with the individual, and any lack of success or failure is seen as a failure on the part of the individual. This conceptualisation views transition very much as a linear progression in an upwards direction, moving from one level to the next, but without a focus on the social, cultural or societal factors which may impact upon transition. This 'structure and agency' debate permeates a great deal of Ecclestone's writing on the subject of transition (e.g. Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes, 2010), and represents an underpinning of sociological theory that provides an important basis for understanding how and why transition occurs, and reflects the author's position within the study of the sociology of education.

A second conceptualisation is more cognisant of the social and contextual aspects of transition as they impact upon individual identity and lead to shifts through cognition and emotion. Pekrun (2011) discusses the ways in which emotions affect learning generally – through attention, memory, motivation and self-regulation. On this view, assumptions are made about transitions as changes within individuals that come about as the product of relevant institutions and their social expectations, rather than viewing the movement between the institutions themselves as denoting the transition. Understanding the complex demands that different contexts' expectations and practices place on individuals both cognitively and emotionally means that within this conceptualisation there is a more distributed notion of responsibility for transition. Briggs, Clark and Hall (2012) do not explicitly define transition, but through empirical work and analysis of secondary data they suggest that the formation of learner identity is central to successful transition. They propose a model of the formation of learner identity that begins well before a student enters university, and identify how the respective influences of the university itself and of the student's educational environments prior to entering university, impact upon the formation of learner identity.

The third conceptualisation apparent in the literature according to Ecclestone (2006) rejects reliance upon particular institutions or contexts as framing transition, and focuses instead on transition as a process of being and becoming. This conceptualisation looks at milestones, turning points or significant events in the life course as the sources of shifts and changes towards being and becoming someone or something, either personally, professionally or educationally. On this view transition is not an identifiable event, and in fact a transition may occur well after a certain event, as a result of an individual's reflections and developments in feelings or attitudes. For example, O'Shea (2013) defines transition as a "movement that involves revisions in identity and agentic affiliations" (p139).

The fourth conceptualisation can be found embedded in post-modern and feminist accounts of transition, and rejects the assumptions above about the significance of life events, institutions, milestones etc. Instead the view expressed here is that transition is an almost permanent human state. Whilst the three views above suggest that transition in one form or another involves both stability and flux, this view suggests that the whole of life is an iterative process.

Alongside Ecclestone et al.'s useful demarcation of these four conceptualisations of transition, sits the more recent work of Crafter and Maunder (2012), writing from a psychological perspective. Whilst the work of Ecclestone has encompassed transition across the life course, Crafter and Maunder write specifically from an educational perspective, drawing on sociocultural theories of learning as development. For the purposes of their work, Crafter and Maunder explicitly define transition as "change being brought about or influenced by some external or social situation, which has the power to shift our understandings of ourselves" (2012, p10). This positions transition as something that cannot be understood at the level of either the individual or the context in isolation, and instead demands sociocultural explanations which acknowledge the fundamental situatedness of human thought and behaviour. In a similar vein, Quinn (2004) suggests a reconceptualization of failed transition as a sociocultural phenomenon, rather than as a problem associated with individuals or institutions. Transition is therefore not conceptualised as a period of change, but "as the experience of changing" (Gorgorio, Planas and Vilella, 2002, p24).

Gale and Parker (2014) suggest that emerging from the literature are three broad conceptualisations of transition within higher education specifically. These are:

> transition as induction;
> transition as development;
> and, transition as becoming.

They note that there are many more empirical studies in the literature that focus on the first two of these conceptualisations than there are on the third. They further note that some views of transition may not fit straightforwardly into one of these three conceptualisations, but that they may include features of several of them.

The conceptualisation of transition as induction, whether implicitly or explicitly defined as such, permeates the literature and has led to the emergence of many studies about the first year experience specifically. If transition is viewed as a distinct, discrete period of time at the beginning of a student's higher education journey then it is easy to see why a focus on first year experiences would be important. However, other literature uses transition as a concrete noun that denotes a period of time in the student journey with a start point and an end point, but at times other than just the first entry point to university; for example, the transition from further education directly into the second or third year of university (Barron and D'Annunzio-Green, 2009), or the transition from study to employment. If transition is viewed as a bounded period of time, then the focus in terms of student support, and in terms of researching transitions, will inevitably be on that discrete period of time; this conceptualisation implicitly problematizes such time periods as troublesome or more difficult to negotiate than others. A focus on induction would be a logical way to support transition into higher education, if transition is conceptualised as something which occurs within a bounded time period. We are beginning to see other literature emerge which addresses transition to employment, using the same conceptualisation of transition as a period of time.

Transition as induction presents a view of the institution as being responsible for enabling students to make the academic and social adjustments necessary to participate fully in university life. On this view, a 'smooth' transition can be facilitated by a comprehensive and well-implemented induction programme. Student agency in the induction process manifests through individual motivation, their willingness to engage with learning opportunities, with other staff and students, and to conform to institutionally accepted norms of behaviour and action. In addition to the adjustments that new students are required to make to the conventions of university study, there will also be discipline-specific conventions that they must engage with.

What is significant about this view are its assumptions about lack of competence or knowledge or skills on the part of the student, and the idea that these can be addressed by institutional approaches to support. This stands in direct opposition to Crafter and Maunder's focus on transition as the experience of changing, rather than as a period of change. Crafter and Maunder's sociocultural approach to theorising transition is explored in more detail in the next section, but they reject the idea that short-term interventions focused on skills acquisition are appropriate ways for practitioners in higher education to support transition, specifically because that approach does not fit their conceptualisation of what transition is and how it happens.

Gale and Parker (2014) identify a second broad conceptualisation of transition within the literature, which is that of transition as development. This shifts the focus from periods of time, to stages of development. Transition as development, like transition as induction, is still viewed as a fairly linear progression, but when the focus is on induction the end of the transition period is denoted by a particular point in time.

In contrast, when viewed as development, progression to the next stage occurs when the individual has completed a process of development, and this may only be approximately associated with a particular point in time. Hussey and Smith (2010) articulate a definition of transition that aligns with this view, in that transitions are presented as complex transformations made up of a series of smaller changes in aspects of individuals such as their attitudes, values, knowledge, beliefs, understanding and skills, which lead to changes in self-concept and learning: "a shift from one state of understanding, development and maturity to another" (p156). Briggs et al.'s (2012) model of the formation of learner identity appears to align with the view of transition as a process of development that is distributed across multiple contexts; however the authors' references to 'extended induction' mean that transition is still viewed as a bounded phenomenon, and one which occurs within and is complete by the end of the first year of study.

The language used by researchers who position transition as development often includes metaphors such as 'trajectory' to denote progression through stages, where that trajectory is a property of an individual; therefore different individuals may have different trajectories. In contrast, researchers who position transition as induction tend to use metaphors such as 'pathways', which are features of the social system that individuals must travel down, rather than being features of the individuals themselves. O'Shea (2013) refers to 'turning points' across the lifespan as central to the development of identity through the interplay of personal, social and institutional factors.

These different conceptualisations are often implicitly embedded within research and practice examples, without an explicit articulation of the working definition that is held, or of its implications. Both view transition as 'problematic'; however, Gale and Parker (2014) are clear that the most significant difference between these two conceptualisations of transition lies in the implicit assumptions about how the 'problem' should be solved. Viewed as induction, the problem of transition should be addressed at the level of the institution; viewed as development, it should be addressed at the level of the individual.

Gale and Parker identify a third conceptualisation of transition from the existing literature. This is expressed in various studies as essentially (2014, p743):

'… a rejection of transition as a useful concept, at least in how the term is often understood within HE.'

Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes' (2010) fourth conceptualisation of transition as discussed above, falls into this latter grouping. Instead of assuming even approximate beginnings, middles and ends to transition, it presents transition as a feature of modern life, taking place across the life course, and not occurring in finite or easily categorised phases, periods or stages. Entering higher education may well be a time of risk and anxiety, but this is not necessarily experienced as problematic by all students. The transformative element of engagement in higher education has the potential to be hugely positive, and this links to Crafter and Maunder's view of transition as the experience of change, rather than the process of change. That experience will be different for all students and the process of meaning-making and transformative learning may be experienced positively or negatively.

What is clear within this third conceptualisation by Gale and Parker (2014) is that there is no universal experience of transition, that transition need not be a period of crisis, and that it certainly may not be any more or less critical than other times, given the complexities and uncertainties of everyday life. On this basis, neither of the preceding two conceptualisations of transition are viewed as useful for truly understanding participation in higher education. Quinn (2010) also argues strongly for the need to re-frame the discussion around transition altogether, since the term simply "does not fully capture the fluidity of our learning or our lives" (p127).

Work by O'Donnell and Tobbell (Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit 2008; O'Donnell, Tobbell, Lawthom and Zammit, 2009; Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit, 2010; Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013a; 2013b), presents a body of empirical work specifically focused on transition into and through higher education and, like Crafter and Maunder (2012), conceptualises transition using sociocultural theory as a process of development, where learning and development are inextricably linked. Like Gale and Parker's (2014) second conceptualisation of transition, in this body of work it is understood as a process of individual development, but development that is fundamentally situated within social contexts, and which therefore cannot be understood solely at the level of the individual. Transition to higher education is a process of shifting identities through engagement in the practices of the higher education community, where those practices are constructed and reconstructed through individual meaning-making within the context of microsystems and broader social macrosystems, all of which impact upon individual action, participation in the higher education community and identity. However, like Gale and Parker's (2014) third conceptualisation, this does not present transition as a bounded process with a beginning and an end point, but as an almost permanent state of being and becoming. Identity is not viewed as static or as something which is eventually fully formed. Students entering higher education may over time develop a student or a learner identity, but they will also have an identity as, for example, a parent or a child, or as an employee. The move to postgraduate study may entail further shifts in identity through participation in yet another range of practices that are differently valued within the postgraduate community.

Given all of the above, it is clear that transition is conceptualised very differently by different authors, and even attempts to explicitly categorise these different conceptualisations cannot fully capture the range of different ways in which it is understood. This should not be taken to imply that it would be possible, nor even desirable, to arrive at a single shared definition of transition; but what is important is that we are clear that in describing transition we may be describing different things to others who also describe transition.

The move beyond description, towards explanation, requires engagement with theory. Interrogation of the explanatory power that different theoretical frameworks have when applied to descriptions of transition, requires an understanding that we may sometimes be describing different things. The next section reviews how different theoretical frameworks have been applied in this field of enquiry.

4.2 Theorising transition

This section identifies where and how existing research and practice in student transitions is located within explicit theoretical frameworks. Gale and Parker (2014) note that transition is under-theorised in the literature. This means that in engaging with the literature we are often unable to move beyond the 'what' of transitions, towards an understanding of the 'how' and the 'why'. Examples of effective practice that have had a positive impact on outcomes thought to relate to transition (e.g. retention or attainment) provide models for other institutions to adopt or adapt. However, without theory we may be unable to explain why a particular practice was successful, nor to predict whether it is likely to be successful in other contexts, with other students, in other disciplines or at other universities.

Some research focuses specifically on certain groups of students, such as non-traditional mature students (e.g. O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007; Askham, 2008) or international students (e.g. Prescott and Hellsten, 2005). Such research is implicitly tied to conceptualisations of transition as process rather than time-period. Yet without theory, we are unable neither to justify assumptions that there might be differences between groups of students in transition, nor to predict what such differences might be and why. For example, Barron and D'Annunzio-Green (2009) identify a range of personal, learning and work-related issues that feature in the subjective experiences of students moving from further education into the second or third year of a university degree programme. The authors imply that the transition experience of such students is somehow different or more challenging than that of other groups in transition. Without the application of any particular theoretical framework it is difficult to capture the fundamental personal, social and psychological factors that might explain how and why their transition experiences are 'different'.

Kyndt, Coertjens, van Daal, Donche, Gijbels and Van Petegem (2015) apply self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2002) to the study of transition to higher education and explore the development of motivation over a period of 25 months, beginning in the final year of students' secondary school education and continuing through their move to university. Whilst the research found an increase in autonomous motivation across the period of study, it does not address the question of whether increases in motivation impact upon transition beyond just being an artefact of the move from one educational context to the next. It is not possible to say whether the students'

experience of transition was facilitated by increases in motivation. Such research, whilst not explicitly defining transition, aligns with Ecclestone's (2006) definition of 'institutional transition' in referring to the move from one educational context to another, with the focus placed on characteristics of the individual making the transition.

Disciplines outside of education have also theorised around the notion of transition. The application of such theories to higher education transition research is not widespread, but allows much greater explanation of transition. For example, the sociological work of Bourdieu (e.g. 1973) on social and cultural capital can be seen in a number of studies that have examined the experiences of students in higher education (e.g. McDonough, 1994, 1997; Berger, 2000; Leese, 2010).

Bourdieu argues that those members of society with higher socio-economic status possess resources beyond just the financial, which mean that they can more successfully negotiate the challenges of participation in certain social and cultural contexts. The transition of middle-class students to higher education will therefore be less 'problematic' than the transition of lower class students, where middle-class students' own social and cultural histories include friends and family members who have previously engaged with higher education themselves, and through which a shared set of social and cultural resources have been developed. Middle-class students, who have family and friends that have been to university, will have been exposed to the discourses and practices of higher education, and so will be more familiar with its conventions and its expectations. Conversely, young people from the middle-classes will not possess the social and cultural capital to successfully negotiate the demands of other contexts with which young people from lower classes may be fully familiar. Social and cultural capital therefore has no intrinsic value, except as it is applied to different social contexts.

Thomas (2002) suggests that the values, practices and conventions of higher education institutions are aligned to the knowledge and experience that middle class students are likely to have gained previously. On this view, the transition of working-class students is likely to involve far greater levels of change. Reay (1995, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2004a, 2004b) has drawn extensively on Bourdieu's work to explain, for example, the experience of 'imposter syndrome' in the transition of certain groups to higher education. Bourdieu's work features in Murtagh's (2012) pre-entry programme for students, recognising that certain students may lack the cultural capital, the system of values and attitudes towards higher education that emerges as a function of social class and family background, that will enable them to successfully engage with university.

Leese's (2010) research into the experiences of students as they enter higher education applies Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and concludes that in order to accommodate the needs of increasingly diverse groups of entrants to HE, universities should fundamentally shift away from viewing the 'problem' of transition as a deficit located in individual students and should instead seek to adapt curricula and processes so that diverse students are accommodated. Holdsworth (2006) uses Bourdieu to suggest that students' residential status at university (living at home versus moving away) is a significant factor in the transition to university life. Holton (2015) also explores the experiences of 'local' and 'non-local' students through the lens of Bourdieu's ideas of capital and habitus and suggests that student geographies are central to the formation of identity, with an understanding of transition as the process of being and becoming a student.

The influence of social theory in theorising transition to education can be seen in the educational psychological literature as well. Crafter and Maunder's (2012) work referred to in the previous section is underpinned by Vygotsky's (1978) theory of development and learning, in which learning is fundamentally socially situated and constructed through engagement with broader social contexts, building on the knowledge of previous generations of those contexts.

Using sociocultural theory Crafter and Maunder discuss three frameworks for understanding transition. The first of these, consequential transitions, are those which have an impact on the individual and the social context they inhabit. The move from school to university can be understood as one such consequential transition, where individuals' prior experiences of learning and engaging in education form the basis of their expectations of higher education study. New students reflect on their experiences of prior contexts within the new context, and resulting in adaptation to the new context.

The second framework proposed for understanding transition using sociocultural theory, allows for an understanding of rupture and identity change. Adapting to the new context of higher education, as a consequential transition, may be experienced by individuals as challenging; however it also has the potential to more fundamentally alter an individual's sense of self, their identity and self-image, leading to significant personal transformation.

The third framework is Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998) where participation in the valued practices of a community is central to individual learning and development, and to identity, but where the community itself is also shifted through the participation of new members, changes to its valued practices and the sharing of expertise. On this view, transition is an identity-shifting process of being and becoming a member of a community, but one within which the community itself also changes.

Tobbell and O'Donnell, who are both psychologists, apply Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice theory to explain the transition to higher education specifically (Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit, 2008; O'Donnell, Tobbell, Lawthom and Zammit, 2009; Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit, 2010; Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013a). Within this framework, participation (or otherwise) in a particular social context comes about as a function of engagement with the valued practices of the community, leading to shifts in identity through participation in those practices. Students entering higher education for the first time are, in Wenger's terms, peripheral participants in the community. Full participants (old timers) are those who have mastered the valued practices of the community. Engagement with full participants of the community allows new members, over a period of time, to move from peripheral to full participation themselves, and the engagement of new members also enables shifts in practice. Crucially, it is through participation in the discourses and the valued practices of the community that learning and development occur, and through which shifts in individuals' identities occurs. This is not about the acquisition of new skills, but about situated learning and inculcation into the valued practices of the community through participation in that community. Transition to higher education is therefore understood and explained through barriers and enablers to participation in the community's valued practices, and to the concomitant identity shifts that such participation brings about.

Scanlon, Rowling and Weber (2007) draw on the symbolic interactionist framework of Schutz (1964, 1970) and Schutz and Luckman (1973) and theorise around the centrality of identity in higher education transition. They discuss the fundamentally situated nature of identity and argue that in transition to higher education, student experiences may be understood through feelings of 'loss' that may occur as their transition necessitates the construction of a new identity (Milligan, 2003). They suggest that as students enter higher education for the first time, they will only have knowledge 'about' the new learning context without contextualised knowledge 'of' that context. Whilst some researchers suggest that certain students will, in Bourdieu's terms, enter university with greater cultural capital than others, Scanlon et al. (2007) suggest that any prior learning experiences will not have enabled new students to acquire critical cultural capital within the higher education context specifically. They found that new students experienced challenges in accessing academic staff, in terms of the perceived remoteness of staff from their learning (as compared with the proximity of teachers to pupils in schools and colleges), in terms of staff's physical lack of availability, and in terms of academics' failure to communicate expectations adequately. Students also experienced challenges in engaging with other students, particularly where there was diversity in students' ages and prior educational experiences. The complex interactions between individual students, academic staff and other students is what leads to the formation of new identities in transition and it is therefore to this nexus of interaction that researchers must look in attempting to understand the transition process.

Layered on top of this, Tobbell and O'Donnell (2013b) also apply Bronfenbrenner's (1974, 1979) ecological theory of development, which goes beyond the positioning of individuals within certain communities, and allows for a broader understanding of the other proximal and distal systems that impact upon those communities. Individuals, within this theoretical framework, exist within microsystems, comprised of their immediate social contexts, including the face-to-face relationships that they have and their everyday activities. Any individual occupies multiple microsystems at any given time. Those microsystems themselves interact and impact upon one another in ways that influence the individual and this network of microsystems, Bronfenbrenner refers to as a mesosystem. An individual may be at once a student and a parent, and these two microsystems may interact so that for one individual the support and encouragement from their family impacts positively on their university life, whilst for another student the opposition to their studies or the continued demands of full-time parenting may impact differently.

The exosystem represents the broader influence of social contexts of which individuals themselves may not be directly aware, but which nevertheless serve to position that individual in certain ways. Funding cuts in higher education may mean that there has been a reduction in staff numbers, and whilst individual students may have no knowledge or awareness of this, the impact on them as a student may manifest in their classroom learning experiences.

The macrosystem represents the shared cultural or societal structures within which these systems are located. The passage of time, and the way in which these different systems are synthesised within developing individuals, is represented through the chronosystem. All of these different systems exert a reciprocal influence on one another. Understood in this way, transition to higher education is a complex and multifaceted process of development and change which can only really be explored through examination of complex networks of human interaction.

Kahu, Stephens, Leach and Zepke (2015) present research into the transition of mature, distance students to university, and explain the transition experiences of these students through the application of theoretical frameworks around student engagement (Kahu, 2013) and academic emotions (Pekrun, 2011). Complex reciprocal relationships exist between individuals and the university context (learning, teaching, course design) so that, for example, "Interest and enjoyment influence engagement, leading to positive outcome emotions, and these cycle back to further increase motivation and self-efficacy, which further increase engagement. Similarly, frustration and anxiety can trigger disengagement, leading to poor outcomes and disappointment that reduce motivation and subsequent engagement" (Kahu et al, 2015, p494).

What all of this theoretically underpinned literature shares is a complex explanation of transition as more than just a move between educational contexts, or a bounded period of time; instead transition is understood as a complex social phenomenon in which the relationships between individuals and their contexts are inextricably linked. Identity shifts may be experienced at the level of the individual, but these come about through the process of participation and experience in the social context.

4.3 Effective practice in supporting transition

What is challenging when reviewing the practice-based literature, and particularly literature that presents studies of transition initiatives or interventions, is often the absence of explicit conceptualisations of transition to underpin the studies. Without such conceptualisations, it is difficult to evaluate why certain initiatives would logically support transition. For example, if transition is explicitly conceptualised as induction, as per Gale and Parker's (2014) typology discussed earlier, then a focus on academic skills based learning opportunities and networking opportunities in the first few weeks of first year at university would logically follow. The success or otherwise of such an induction initiative could be measured or assessed through retention or drop-out rates. A researcher holding a different conceptualisation of transition could challenge the logic of the induction initiative based on their different view of what transition is, but the rationale underpinning the initiative itself would be justified, and the debate can move along successfully and productively. Where no conceptualisations are articulated, or where contradictions appear between concepts and practice, there is a risk that the literature becomes saturated with descriptive studies of practice-based initiatives without moving the theoretical debate along in terms of understanding and explaining transition, and therefore in terms of assisting practitioners to make informed and evidence-based decisions regarding effective practice in the support of transition.

According to Crafter and Maunder, the three sociocultural frameworks they identify all have important implications for higher education practitioners. There should be a focus on the provision of social resources, networking opportunities and support to establish new relationships with existing members of the community in order to facilitate transition. The prior experiences of individual students and their previous educational encounters will affect how each one negotiates the transition, and so flexible, personalised and comprehensive approaches to supporting students are necessary rather than a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

Similarly, Tobbell and O'Donnell's application of sociocultural theory necessitates a focus on support that accounts for the individualised nature of shifting student identities and on opportunities for the development of relationships and participation in practices with established members of the community. The opportunity to engage in and with the wider university community is not something which students can unproblematically take, though. Leese (2010) found that because of work and other commitments, less than 30% of students in their study spent any more than 15 hours per week on campus. Haggis (2006) identified what has come to be widely referred to in the literature as the 'new student' who spends short periods of time on campus and who often attends only for taught sessions. A product of the widening participation agenda in the UK, these students may not be able to engage with the university community in traditional ways which would support the establishment of relationships with staff and other students, and in ways that would facilitate engagement with the practices of the community.

Transition support must be prolonged on this view, then, rather than short-term. The significant changes which individuals may be undergoing in terms of identity reconstruction have the potential to be hugely powerful and transformative in positive ways. Rather than problematizing transition and attempting to address the 'problem' in a short period of time, practitioners should allow students to engage in their own processes of meaning making, and support them to negotiate challenges and opportunities along the way, rather than attempting a 'quick fix'. A focus on the process of transition and students' successful negotiation of personal change, rather than on the product of transition in the form of the acquisition of new skills or knowledge, is more likely to allow for transformative development towards a successful learner identity.

This view contrasts starkly with that of those who view transition as induction, in Gale and Parker's (2014) terms, since a focus on transition as induction necessitates short-term support rather than prolonged support. For example, Knox (2005) reports an initiative put in place to support the transition of students from further to higher education through a transition 'module' undertaken by students, and found that those who completed the module were more likely than other students from further education to continue with their studies. Laing, Robinson and Johnston (2005) discuss an online induction programme for students that runs for the first six weeks of term, but is extended with additional activities at appropriate times across the full first year. Even when the focus shifts to the full first year of university (e.g. Briggs et al., 2012), as opposed to just the first few weeks, a contrast is still apparent with conceptualisations of transition as development or becoming.

The focus on the first year in supporting transition is perhaps not surprising given the amount of data which exists on drop-out rates in the first year, and this has led to a sustained focus on the first year experience as a crucial period in which universities should support students to make the adjustment to higher education. This focus builds on the seminal work of Tinto (1987) on first-year students' success and progression. Supporting students to

engage with activities that enable navigation of the institutional requirements of university life, such as course selection, funding advice, accommodation and orientation are referred to by Gale and Parker (2014) as first generation co-curricular activities. Second generation curricular activities centre on the development of academic and learning skills, understanding assessment tasks and understanding the curriculum. Kift's recent work on transition pedagogy advocates a more holistic approach which combines these two types of activities through institutional strategies to develop and manage the induction process (Kift, Nelson and Clarke, 2010), and argues that transition is dependent on social integration as well as on academic engagement.

Wingate (2007) presents a framework for supporting transition, within which a conceptualisation of "the transition period" is explicitly articulated (p391). The focus of the framework is on 'learning to learn' as one key aspect of students' successful transitions, although the authors do not suggest what the other aspects of transition might be. Learning to learn is presented as an important way to help students understand what is expected of them at university. Students' conceptions of learning and knowledge are addressed, their competence as independent learners is developed, as is their competence at constructing knowledge in their disciplines. This approach represents an important shift away from the skills-based approaches to supporting learning that often permeate higher education, and which are based on a deficiency model within which the 'problems' of individual students are addressed. Instead it promotes a mainstreaming of the notion of developing effective learners, with a distributed model of responsibility for that development across educational developers, students and academic staff.

Nevertheless, this framework still perpetuates the notion that new entrants to higher education must be supported to engage with the academic competences that are expected of them at university. Such approaches have been criticised by those who argue that universities are at least partly responsible for the reproduction of dominant social norms, and of certain forms of social and cultural capital discussed previously (Quinn, 2010; Thomas, 2002). On this view, what would support effective transitions would be a recognition that universities themselves should be changing, developing new and flexible ways for diverse students to engage in learning that is meaningful to them, and therefore shifting their own practices to accommodate new entrants, instead of expecting new students to shift and change in order to assimilate into a pre-existing system. Prescott and Hellsten (2005) suggest that the transition of international students is more challenging than for others because of the additional barriers of language, and differences in cultural educational norms and practices, and rather than suggesting more targeted support for international students to be able to assimilate into existing practices, they argue for a process of institutional change towards different and more inclusive learning and teaching practices. Quan, Smailes and Fraser (2013) identified additional challenges for international students who enter directly into the later stages of a UK degree, but found that such students' transitions can be supported through engagement with intra-networks of other international students.

Murtagh (2012) reports a higher education transition project aimed at pre-entry students, drawing explicitly on the work of Bourdieu discussed earlier, through recognition that students' transitions may be affected by their social and cultural capital. They argue that a process of 'aligned action' (Kim and Schneider, 2005) by parents, through which parents channel resources and information from outside of the family specifically to support their children in achieving their own goals, should facilitate the transmission of cultural capital. On this basis, they offered 'preparation for HE' sessions within open events for prospective students, to which friends and family members were also invited. Current students were also invited to attend these events, which provided a context in which notions of independent study and of assessment were discussed. Feedback following the event was positive from current students, potential students and family and friends. For example, prospective students indicated that following the event they had a better understanding of the expectations and requirements of university. Family and friends indicated that they had a better understanding of what the prospective student would be doing at university, and of what the expectations of the university are. As above, this seems positive and the authors note that this is "not in itself the answer to ensuring successful transition and thus retention in HE, however, we do believe that it is a step in the right direction to ensuring that induction is meaningful, appropriate and allows for those aspiring to HE…to navigate their own way" (Murtagh, 2012, p37). However, given the debates above it could be argued that this approach simply supports the reproduction of certain established social norms, values and types of behaviour that are associated with particular types of social and cultural capital. Students are still expected to assimilate into an established system, and perhaps they (and their family) are better prepared for that system, but the system itself does not change and will still be an easier one to engage with for certain groups of students than others. Murtagh (2010) explores the transition to higher education through research with first year students and their lecturers and concludes that there is a lack of understanding on the part of students as to what is expected, which could be overcome through a clearer articulation by staff of their expectations. McKendry, Wright and Stevenson (2014) also found that clarity in the expectations of the course and of higher education

practices were key to the experiences of students. Baer (2008) suggests that dialogue between students and academic staff is crucial to transition. He argues that the perceptions and understandings of both groups about university study, academic practices and student actions should be shared, to enable greater levels of reflection by all parties on the role that their different expectations play in the creation of misunderstandings about transition.

It is interesting that in her concluding statement above, Murtagh (2012) articulates the view that successful transition leads to student retention. This would not straightforwardly be the view of all transition researchers. Sociocultural explanations of transitions necessitate individualised understandings of transition as a process of development, change and identity shifts. Students may experience significant challenges to full participation in the community of higher education such that they never establish an identity as learner or student, but nevertheless they may complete their programme of study and graduate successfully. Perhaps from an institutional perspective, retention of such students represents success, but in terms of the transformation of their identity the transition would not have been successful. Similarly, as Quinn (2010) points out, the decision to drop out of university can, for some students, be viewed as a positive decision brought about through a transformative process of development and change which leads to a realisation that higher education is, at least in the immediate term, just not for them. The institutional view of such students as representing failed transition is therefore not reflected in theories of transition that focus on development and identity.

Hussey and Smith (2010) align with the view of transition as development, but note that the institutional structures of higher education do not really allow for that development to occur at its own pace. Instead, academic year structures and timings of assessment require students to conform to institutional timeframes when they may not be 'ready' and without putting in place programmes of study that are designed explicitly to support students in making successful transitions. For example, a student may experience failure because they have not yet developed from being a surface learner to a deep learner by the time a significant piece of summatively assessed work is required. Re-framing such failures as a failure on the part of the institution to successfully and flexibly support the student's transition, shifts the focus from the individual to the university. Bowles, Fisher, McPhail, Rosenstreich and Dobson (2014) studied student perceptions of the enablers and barriers to transition to university and found that these fell into two categories: one of these represents student-centred enablers such as study skills and time management which were considered to be largely outside the control of the university; the other represents university-led enablers such as induction processes, facilities and organised social events, which were considered to be outside the control of the students.

Research by Young, Glogowska and Lockyer (2007) with early leavers from higher education found that university staff were more likely to attribute drop-outs by students to factors located within the students themselves, whilst students were more likely to attribute their drop-out to their experiences of the university. Changes to the length of modules or courses to allow such transitions to take place, providing more opportunities for formative assessment and feedback prior to summative assessment, and including low-stakes assessment early in the student's journey with higher-stakes assessment later on, have the potential to improve retention as the institution re-organises itself around students' processes of transition, rather than requiring students' transitions to align with institutional systems. Crosling, Heagney and Thomas (2009) discuss student retention as a function of engagement, but are clear that such engagement is not solely the responsibility of the student. They suggest that a fundamental shift to student-centred orientations to learning and teaching is required, through curriculum development, which should include active learning approaches, integration of study skills and formative assessment approaches. Weadon and Baker (2014) examined the characteristics of environments that best support student transitions, again shifting the focus away from student characteristics as mediating transition, towards institutional factors and the provision of appropriate learning environments. Jones, Black, Green, Langton, Rutherford, Scott and Brown (2014) examined new university students' knowledge of key concepts that had been taught to them at school previously. Having identified that there were generally low levels of knowledge of these key concepts the authors suggest a redesign of undergraduate curricula to take account of this, rather than suggesting that students' knowledge be improved.

The challenges to higher education in reconceptualising transition as more than just retention, and in seeking to shift its own practices to accommodate diverse students resonate with the Communities of Practice sociocultural framework, within which the valued practices of the community are understood as changing over time as a result of the participation of new members. Effective approaches to supporting transition, taking this theoretical framework forward, would usefully seek to change pedagogies, values, and language in order to accommodate students, rather than seeking to protect and maintain the existing system, which is what the transition as induction approach seeks to achieve.

Hultberg, Plos, Hendry and Kjellgren (2008) present an initiative which may be considered to attempt to shift institutional practices as part of the induction process. Two courses were run in parallel to each other – one for new students and one for the staff who were teaching those students. The students engaged in an 'introduction to higher education' course over the first ten weeks of term, and in parallel the teaching staff engaged in a course on pedagogy for higher education teachers. Students studied topics such as tools for research, communication skills and learning how to learn (as per Wingate's (2007) framework above), whilst staff studied topics such as pedagogy, computer-based learning and assessment. On the one hand, this could be seen as an attempt to recognise the distributed nature of transition across the university community rather than just within the students. Teachers in this initiative evaluated how their teaching strategies influenced students' learning, through reflective diaries that students produced, and the authors' use of the term 'scaffolding' in the title of the paper might suggest a sociocultural approach. On the other hand, an underpinning theoretical framework is not articulated, and the authors note that many of the teaching staff found it difficult to engage in these reflective processes, and that they indicated a preference for more instructional, teacher-centred approaches to learning. Since educators are ultimately the agents who have most power in the learning environment, those teachers' preferences will enable them to perpetuate such teaching methods, and so students' 'learning to learn' remains a metaphor for learning what universities require of students in order for students to be inculcated into the practices of the existing system. This might not be problematic if conceptualisations of transition are around transition as induction; but this initiative implicitly acknowledged a more distributed notion of transition. The authors say, "The transition process must be regarded in a context with several different actors" (Hultberg et al., 2008, p54); yet in practice this manifests as a context into which students must assimilate, where the teachers are the actors with the power to determine the practices that are valued within the context. The paper does not indicate whether students who engaged in this course were more or less likely to complete their programme of study, and whilst the authors report generally positive evaluations of the programme by staff and students, the question of whether this has succeeded in scaffolding students' transitions to university remains unanswered.

5. Case studies of current practice

Given the lack of consensus about how transition is conceptualised explicitly or implicitly within the literature, it is hardly surprising that there is also a lack of consistency within and between institutions on how they approach supporting transition in practice. Some run institution-wide initiatives aimed at tackling or supporting transitions. In addition to these institution-wide initiatives, some also offer School or department-led initiatives to support transitions, whilst others only offer School/departmental initiatives. This in itself demonstrates a lack of consensus between institutions on whether transition should be addressed at the institutional level, or School/department-level, or both concurrently. What all institutions seem to have in common is some attempt at addressing the issue of transition internally. While they recognise a need for some transitional support to exist within their institution and agree in principle that students' transition experiences into or through HE are important, they fundamentally differ on their views about transition and hence differ in their practices of supporting transition.

The initiatives discussed by the participating institutions in this project provide an important insight, often implicitly, into current views about transition in practice. For example, one institution described their two day induction to support students making the transition from HN level study to degree level. During the induction, students are introduced to their student handbook and are informed of what is expected of them in terms of assessment, policy and procedure. During this time, students are also assigned a personal tutor, with whom they meet each term to discuss any issues they might be experiencing. This institution discussed their recognition that the two day induction tends to mean that students are "bombarded" with information, and their intention to introduce a universal one week induction for all first year students to address this. They also offer induction days for students as they progress through stages of study at the institution. It is clear, then, that this institution subscribes to a conceptualisation of transition that is bounded by time – a period of time that is problematic for students to negotiate. This approach is what Gale and Parker (2014) suggest to be one of the three broad conceptualisations of transition emerging from the literature.

As discussed earlier, if transition is conceptualised as a difficult or finite period of time, then induction programmes would be a logical way to support these difficult times, facilitating transitions. The practice within this institution for supporting transitions contrasts with sociocultural perspectives on transition, where the focus is about the experience of change as opposed to a bounded period of time. Specifically, transition as induction is at odds with Craft and Maunder's (2012) and O'Donnell and Tobbell's (Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit, 2008; O'Donnell, Tobbell, Lawthom and Zammit, 2009;Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit, 2010; Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013a; 2013b) conceptualisation of transition as the experience of change and the process of development. As mentioned, using Wenger's Communities of Practice theory, O'Donnell and Tobbell view transition as a process of being and becoming through engagement in the practices of the HE community which, depending on the student's process of meaning-making, may lead to shifts in identity and trajectory. Akin to Knox (2005), the institution evidences their success at supporting transition based on their improved progression and attainment rates. This 'evidence' of transition links to Murtagh's (2012) view that successful transition leads to student retention. As discussed previously, this would not be the shared view of sociocultural researchers. The institution's future plans to introduce a universal one week induction for all first years suggests their implicit view that given the right formula, students will all share the same induction experience, and that this will facilitate successful transition. This is incongruent with Gale and Parker's third and Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes' (2010) fourth conceptualisation of transition, within which it is argued that there is no universal experience of transition. Therefore, this particular institution's transition initiative is consistent with literature which problematizes a period of time, whilst it is inconsistent with sociocultural perspectives since they reject short term interventions as appropriately supporting transitions. The induction approach does not align with sociocultural conceptualisations of what transition is and how it manifests.

Another institution described their faculty-led initiative to supporting transition, explicitly defining transition as "a sustained change in students' cognitions and behaviours". Aimed at first years, this initiative involves a mentor system whereby all first year students have a second year mentor and learning sessions are provided for students to engage in discussions of how to approach their first assignment, with library, academic and support staff available for informal discussions. Parts of the initiative are compulsory and contribute a small percentage to the student's first assignment grade. The physical environment where the programme runs is purposely set up informally, with sofa areas to foster informal discussions between students and between students and staff. The institution's rationale for the transition initiative is to get students into the library, to build relationships, and generally "getting students to feel like they belong to the university". From these practices, it is clear that this initiative conceptualises transition very differently to the one discussed above, and so how they set about

supporting transition is very different in practice. This initiative views transition as an identity-shifting process of being and becoming a member of the HE community, and has strong links with the sociocultural conceptualisation of transition. Specifically, the institution's practice of second year mentors and access to academic and support staff ties in with Wenger's Communities of Practice theory, with new members (first years) learning about the community's practices from old timers (second years and staff). This institution's initiative also links with the second framework Crafter and Maunder discuss which recognises that adapting to a new context of HE is a consequential transition with the potential of being transformative for the individual's identity. Having instructed an independent survey on student transitions, the institution identified that academic discourse is not always clear to first year students. Therefore, part of their initiative focuses on academic language (e.g. what is meant by "critically evaluate"). The survey also revealed that the best transitions are made by students living in student halls, supporting their view that social connections and sharing information facilitates learning. This understanding links with Holton's (2015) view that student geographies are central to the formation of identity. In these terms, students living in halls of residence may experience better transitions due to their local geography during the process of being and becoming. This institution described some familiarity and engagement with transition literature, but stated their doubt that managers "want to see the theory" informing practice. They suggested that "managers are being driven by strategies and goals of the university – they're not academic, they're managers." This might explain the discrepancy between the institution's conceptualisation of transition and how they measure the impact of their initiative. Although holding a sociocultural view of transition, student retention is one way they measure the success of their initiative. As discussed, using student retention statistics to evaluate transition is inconsistent with sociocultural understandings of what transition means, since students who never experience a shift towards an established student identity might well still complete and graduate successfully from their programme. Perhaps the managerial focus on strategies, goals and evidence of impact for evaluation purposes might explain this apparent contradiction.

Many of the participating institutions described various peer-assisted approaches to supporting transition. However, within these initiatives there is a lack of agreement about how this should work in practice. For example, one institution's department-led initiative timetables peer tutorial sessions into the first year class schedule. A programme-led initiative in another institution utilises a peer-assisted approach which involves fourth year students teaching second year students statistics. The premise of this initiative is that it will facilitate the transition of fourth year students by taking ownership and building confidence, whilst second years develop through learning from those they consider to be "one of us". In another institution again, an initiative offered in half of Schools across the institution, PhD students are responsible for co-ordinating subject-specific skills workshops. The idea behind this initiative is that it supports the PhD students' transition to future academic work, and supports undergraduates' transition by enabling access to and participation in the skills valued within the community. Although the specific interventions differ, these initiatives all share elements of sociocultural views on transition, recognising the importance of the situatedness of learning and development (Wenger, 1998; Crafter and Maunder, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, these initiatives reflect assumptions that transition is about more than a bounded period of time, and that it is about development and change. Despite recognition that transition transcends a focus on the first year of study, some of these institutions only offer their initiatives to first year students. This practice is inconsistent with the participants' conceptualisations of transition and with the sociocultural transition literature they appear to align with. Furthermore, their attempts to gauge the success of their initiative through retention and attainment rates are also at odds with their view that transition is about a shift in an individual's identity through a process of being and becoming a student. Therefore, many contradictions permeate institutional practices to supporting transition.

One institution described how their transition initiative involves collecting data from early leavers on why they left, to better understand how to support student transitions in the future. The institution works in partnership with 12 other HE institutions nationally, contacting early leavers on their behalf and offering advice and guidance. The underlying assumption embedded within this approach is that early leavers represent failed transition. This perspective contrasts with Quinn's (2010) assertion that students' decision to leave before they complete their course need not be considered as negative. Instead, this decision might well have been brought about as a result of transition – a transformative process of development which resulted in a re-negotiated understanding that HE is not for them. This demonstrates another way in which practice and theory surrounding transition are at odds with one another.

Another institution of the view that transition is about development and change described their numerous initiatives aimed at supporting key points in transition. These include institution-wide initiatives aimed at postgraduate taught students, opportunities for peer-assisted learning in the first two years of undergraduate

study and initiatives to support 'out of university transitions'. In addition, off campus initiatives include partnerships with local communities with low HE participation rates. This seems to link to Gale and Parker's understanding that there is no universal transition. Most of these initiatives were developed intuitively based on staff's reflections on areas that could be better supported, rather than on an engagement with transition literature. This institution's off-campus initiative in low HE participation areas involves working with primary schools, pupils and parents in an attempt to normalise and promote positive images of learning and to make the presence of the institution known from a widening participation perspective. This perspective on transition recognises that it is something that takes place across the lifecourse (Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes, 2010), rather than taking place at notable troublesome stages. This institution's understanding of transition relates to work by Bourdieu (1973) on social and cultural capital, which suggests that those with higher socio-economic status hold resources which better equip them to negotiate the challenges of participation in certain social and cultural contexts. This institution's specific initiative parallels work by Murtagh (2012) which attempts to address a lack of social capital and attitudes towards HE that emerge as a result of social class and family background to normalise engagement with university. However, Scanlon et al. (2007) would suggest that this approach is unhelpful in supporting transitions, and only serves to support students' knowledge 'about' their new learning context without a contextualised knowledge 'of' that context. In this sense, it is the complex interactions between students and between students and university staff that lead to shifts in identity, not an increase in cultural capital which normalises university life. Significantly, though, this institution acknowledges that their view of transition as development makes it difficult to measure the impact of their initiatives, thus it is a challenge to assess whether the initiative has been successful.

6. Key findings and implications

Ten key findings emerge from the preceding literature review and review of current practice initiatives:

1. Based on contemporary higher education research and practice, transition is most appropriately conceptualised as a process of identity development and change, brought about through complex interactions between students, staff and institutional contexts, all shifting over time;

2. Sociocultural theories from sociology and psychology provide the most powerful explanatory frameworks within which transition can be explained and understood;

3. In transition initiatives there remains a focus on induction as the principal means of supporting transition, through time-bounded interventions which often focus on skills or on attempts to provide detailed information about the expectations of higher education. This is the case even where implicitly held assumptions about transition as development are evident;

4. For practice to reflect research and theory in higher education transition, institutions should seek to put in place creative, holistic and longer-term initiatives that focus on individual development and change through participation in the higher education community;

5. Induction can no longer be the focus for transition, and whilst it may be a key period during which students are supported to engage with higher education practices for the first time, induction cannot be 'all that there is' in terms of understanding and addressing transition;

6. Institutions should seek to shift their own practices, structures and processes in order to accommodate diverse groups of students and their expectations, rather than focusing on skills-based training or engaging in ever-more explicit articulations of the unchanging expectations of the institution;

7. Skills-based approaches that introduce students to higher education practices will only truly support transition insofar as they form part of an overarching approach to facilitating full participation in and membership of the university community – the practices of which must also shift over time;

8. Viewed as a process of development and change, the notion of a 'successful' transition does become difficult to measure or evaluate, which may explain why transition support initiatives still tend to focus on distinct time-periods;

9. This challenge of measurement or evaluation is something that institutions and individual practitioners must accept, but could be addressed through rigorous qualitative research into student experiences of development and change across the learning journey, which would complement quantitative evaluations of retention rates;

10. Institutions and their students must come together and recognise their respective roles in transition, and institutional identities, as well as student identities, should shift to accommodate and support these processes of development and change.

6.1 Implications for senior management

> Induction should not be the principal focus for the institution's support of student transition;

> Shared, internal visions of what it means to 'be' and 'become' a student of the university should be articulated, and responsibility for supporting students towards this vision should be distributed across the institution, embedded in programmes and departments and shared by management, academic staff, support staff and the student community;

> Institutional documents such as programme specifications and module/course descriptors should be adapted to include specific statements about how transition, as development and change, is supported across the length of the student journey, including development opportunities as students move from one level of study to another, towards independence and criticality, from theory to practice/placement elements, from study to employment etc.;

> Viewed as a process of development and change, transition will be facilitated by more radically flexible institutional approaches that acknowledge the institution's responsibility to shift academic practices to accommodate their students;

> Flexibility in the length of modules/courses should be enabled through regulatory frameworks, so that these can be engaged with over longer or shorter periods of time in response to student needs, instead of learning periods having to conform to the predetermined length of a 'term';

> Flexibility in assessment practices should be enabled through regulatory frameworks to acknowledge that development may occur at different rates – for example, through 'fit to sit' approaches that allow students to undertake assessment when they are ready, instead of at predetermined assessment points in an academic year;

> Senior management should critically evaluate their institution's use of traditional approaches to assessment, and take steps to shift assessment practices in order to accommodate the different strengths of non-traditional students, acknowledging the different ways in which knowledge and skills can be demonstrated;

> Senior management should support and encourage institutional engagement with the notion of transition as more than just retention, taking active steps to identify and openly discuss the multiple (positive and negative) reasons for student drop-out;

> Senior management should support academic staff and students to recognise the potentially transformative nature of higher education, even when this leads to non-completion of students' programmes of study;

> Senior management should acknowledge and critically reflect on institutional factors that affect retention, and take action to change these to better support student engagement;

> Senior management should establish partnerships with schools and colleges with a view to better understanding prospective students' diverse backgrounds and experiences and with a commitment to changing academic practice to accommodate this diversity.

6.2 Implications for academic and support professionals

> Development and change should be supported through all learning activities across the student journey, embedded within modules/courses and programmes and encompassing more than just induction;

> Staff should make efforts to engage with students and potential students before they arrive at university, with a genuine commitment to adapting practices to accommodate students' own experiences and expectations, and not just to raise awareness of long-standing, traditional university expectations of students;

> The processes of development and change that underpin transition are facilitated through participation in the university community and opportunities for dialogue and discourse with other students and staff are therefore crucial and should be embedded within programmes, so that students feel part of the community;

> Mastery of academic practices or skills requires engagement and participation in the academic community by students, and such participation in practice should be facilitated by student-centred and collaborative learning and teaching approaches;

> Such pedagogical approaches should involve changes to academic practices by academic staff, in partnership with students, to accommodate diversity in the student body and to accommodate diverse ways of knowing, thinking and practicing;

> Where institutional regulations permit, academics should change assessments to allow students to undertake summative work when they are ready, rather than only at certain designated points in the year;

> Multiple, low-stakes summative assessment or formative assessment opportunities should be provided to students to support their engagement with new academic practices before high-stakes summative assessments are undertaken;

> Assessment and feedback must form an integral part of the teaching and learning process, supporting students to learn through sustained and embedded engagement with practice over time, instead of a reliance on skills-based teaching as an add-on to other learning activities;

> Academics should provide more authentic and diverse assessment opportunities reflecting the diverse nature of students' experiences and ways of knowing;

> Staff should be empowered to openly explore reasons for student drop-out in a context of trust and critical reflection.

6.3 Implications for researchers

> Empirical research and practice-based literature should explicitly articulate working definitions of transition;

> Research methods should reflect definitions of transition so that the unit of analysis reflects the phenomenon being explored: for example, transition understood as a social phenomenon cannot be researched using individual methods alone since the unit of analysis is the individual within their social context, so ethnographic or multi-method approaches may be more appropriate;

> Whether subjective experiences, observations of behaviour or quantitative measures of success are reported, researchers should engage with the role that each of these play in understanding transition overall, rather than equating one or other of these with an understanding of transition;

> In evaluating or presenting transition initiatives, practitioner-researchers' articulation of their definition of transition should be accompanied by clarity around the aims or objectives of the initiative, particularly in relation to what would constitute 'success', and how such success will be measured;

> The largest gap in the empirical research literature relates to transition out of higher education, whether conceptualised as failure, drop-out, or positive development, and researchers should direct attention to this gap to generate empirical data and apply theory in order to explain this aspect of transition;

> Viewed as development and change, particularly in relation to individual identity, the challenges for researchers of measurement and evaluation of transition should be acknowledged and celebrated;

> Researchers and practitioners should commit to undertaking longitudinal explorations of transition as development and change, despite the challenges that this approach to research inevitably presents;

> Socio-cultural, psychological and sociological theory have great explanatory power when applied to transition and the field of enquiry will benefit from more consistent application of theory to research, to explain the personal and social factors that underpin transition, leading to the development of theoretically and empirically driven educational practice.

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8 Appendices

Appendix 1: Semi-structured interview schedule

Interviews will be semi-structured, in order to allow participants' thoughts, ideas and perceptions to guide the interview, rather than the researchers' agenda steering the interview.

Thus, rather than a pre-defined set of questions, the researcher will use a number of key topics which may guide the interview if appropriate. Topics to be explored will include:

Description of specific transition initiative in practice

- Rationale for the specific initiative
- Perceived impact of the initiative
- Evidence of the impact of the initiative
- Views on what transition means in this context
- Engagement with/awareness of theory / concepts of transition
- Perceived limitations of the initiative
- Future plans for enhancement or new initiatives
- Goodness of fit between theory and practice

8 Appendices

Appendix 2: Institutional case studies summaries

Initiative 1

Description of initiative

The First Year Experience programme in the Faculty of Arts. Been running for about 4 years. Looked at transition pedagogy and collaborated with another University on their understandings of the programme. Set up a mentor system – all first year students have a student mentor who is often a second year student and they build a relationship with the first year student. They inform them about resources available, make sure they attend lectures and tutorials. Those running the programme work with academics and librarians to target the first assignment the student engages with. The learning advisors book out the library and set it up informally to provided targeted learning sessions to address their first assignment. Students encouraged to attend and to work with learning advisors to work on how to approach essays etc. Also sessions with subject librarians about findings sources. Tutors from the students' course can be there for issues relating to essay content. Most of the programmes are not compulsory but some of them are. They are well attended, especially in the first semester – even in the optional sessions. They see more males attend than females. The students' first point of contact when they arrive at a session is with a second year student – "so, someone that's like them". Students are informed that they can leave at any point they wish. Believes that this informal environment might be more attractive to males. Also run generic online workshops to connect students with online resources. For the compulsory parts of the First Year Experience Programme, students' assignment is split into two: the first is an orientation assignment worth 5% for students to come pre-prepared with answers to questions about what the focus of their assignment is etc.

Rationale for initiative

To get students into the library. From a learning support perspective it is important to build up relationships with students. But mostly for students to gain some social connection with support staff at the university. Just as much about a friendly face to welcome them to the group. "Getting students to feel like they belong to the university" and is important for retention issues. Supporting students to approach their first assignments. The first assignment is a big ask for students on top of the emotional issues they experience. It also emerged from the private survey that students don't always understand what is meant might 'Discuss' or 'Evaluate' or 'Critically discuss'. So there is focus on explaining these things.

Rationale for workshop is based on scalability – can't see all students at workshops. The workshops continue to run based on an issue of equity and for students in faculties that do not have initiatives in place.

Perceived impact

To reduce retention and introduce students to university life.

Evidence of impact

Average grade has improved. Retention rates have improved over the past 3-4 years.

Views on what transition means:

Belonging. Social learning and a sense of identity. At the university had a private institution did a survey on first year students about transition and students reported the biggest issue is having some kind of social connection at the university – with other students, with staff, support centres. In response to this, the ethos of the targeted learning session is very social and encouraging that kind of connection. Survey showed that best transition is made by students in halls. Social connections and sharing information facilitates transitions. Defines learning as "a sustained change in students' cognition and behaviours". So, transition exists across year progress and then onto employment.

Engagement with/awareness of theory/concepts of transition:

Uses scaffolding approach and social learning to support all different types of students, whether coming straight from school, different races and genders – considered important to supporting transitions.

Perceived limitations of initiative:

Some students couldn't attend due to work commitments or timetable conflict. But these students said the online support was enough. Don't have data on the shifts that students might experience in terms of understanding and academic capability to see that impact. E.g. do they prepare for essays differently now? So can't see the impact of the initiative on that and need to think about that more. Consistency with all learning advisors and the approach taken can be difficult to achieve – each advisor has varied skills.

Future plans:

In second semester find drop-off of numbers attending the initiative. So, thinking about how to make the second semester something more advanced. E.g. some students want to know what to do to get an A.

Goodness of fit between theory and practice:

Looked at constructivist theory, behaviourist theory and transition theory. Is aware of the theory, but doesn't explicitly look at that for practice. Suggests it is maybe more implicitly informing the practice. Don't present as "here is the learning theory". Don't get a lot of time to do that and "doubts that the managers want to see the theory". "Managers are being driven by strategies and goals of the university - they're not academics, they're managers". Practical restraints and people do not always present the way the literature might suggest. Thinks about theory thematically rather than in terms of author and the theory in detail when considering practice. Suggests that he couldn't name the authors or the name of the certain theories, but knows about areas of tension that are discussed in the literature.

Initiative 2

Description of transition initiative

Focused largely on widening participation and deals with a number of transitions. Not just the transition to 1st year. Initiative to support transition from primary to secondary through working with local community areas with low participation rates post-16 years and work in partnership with these areas and the parents and families to support participation in class.

Initiatives in early years – supporting curriculum delivery e.g. providing modern language delivery. UG language students are placed in local primary schools to deliver this.

Another initiative looks at under achievement by 13 years old males as they make subject choices. Uses the Philosophy of Olympism and powerful role models to encourage good practice in young people.

On campus – initiatives for students transitioning into first two years and promoting extracurricular activities. Also provide opportunities for peer-assisted learning to support transitions.

Supporting transitions out of university - The institutional award and peer-assisted learning.   Uses Keith Topping's book to inform this.

MOVING ON – a programme for adult learners and young students from high school is another transition course that takes place in week 0.

Also works with staff transitions into the labour market.

Rationale for initiative

To promote positive images of learning, to increase widening participation, and to provide something that is currently absent.

Perceived impact

Setting up transitions for later down the road to take place better.

Evidence of impact

Measure impact on P6-7 and S1. Asking teachers what impact had on pupils and community. Answers aren't always about impact – it's not an evaluation of what took place. Look at impact every couple of years – not every year. Every year getting closer to perfection but need to continue working with the community. The impact on community is positive and they want initiative to continue.

Views on what transition means

Not just the transition into 1st year**.** Various transitions at various levels. Normalising notion of higher education at early stages.

Engagement with/awareness of theory/concepts

Engaging with literature to inform understanding of transition from primary to secondary. Peer-assisted learning literature used, too.

Perceived limitations of initiative

Funding needs to be available to keep doing the work. Also need space for innovation.

Future plans

Create new innovative practice where it's needed. Need to continue with a longevity approach. Communities don't want to work with you if you appear for a year and then don't reappear. That affects impact – need long term plan where constantly there. E.g. work in primary schools for 10 years, so part of the year. Seen as part of what the school does and normalises the notion of what a university might be so that's one example of how the long term approach can work.

Continue with supporting 'transitions out' so students think about and engage with developing attributes.

Goodness of fit between theory and practice

Some broad theory works well in practice. Keith Topping's peer-assisted learning works well for supporting students' transition into the workplace.

Goodness of fit between theory and practice

Initiative 3

Description of transition initiative

A programme of support specifically for postgraduate taught students. Institution-wide, rather than discipline specific. Organised by the academic development centre. Focus on the provision of workshops and development events/seminars at key points in the PGT journey – transition into, through and out of students' PGT programmes. Pre-arrival signposting towards support services (e.g. English language teaching), to the PGT blog, and academic development. Upon arrival, focus is on induction activity, and there are monthly study skills sessions including e-writing, tutorial skills, exam skills, presentation skills, academic writing and a panel event on funding for doctoral study for students who may wish to progress to PGR study after their PGT programme. At the start of semester two the focus is on refresher academic support and continued study skills sessions (e-writing, presentation skills, time management, exam skills). Also sessions on dissertation writing, more doctoral funding advice, problem solving, creativity, leadership, networking and negotiation. To support the transition out of PGT there are signposting activities on careers, funding and further study. The academic development centre also devolves some funding to schools each year which allows for a discussion of how they might use this to support their own PGT students.

Rationale for initiative

General perception that there are centralised support opportunities for undergraduate students and for PGR students, but that there was nothing specifically geared towards PGT students. Desire to support PGT students to enhance the PGT student experience. Much of what was put in place was developed intuitively or instinctively, based on staff's reflections on what they would want or need, if they were a PGT student. Discipline specific support for PGT students varies between schools. There was never a specific need to (for example) increase PGT numbers or address retention or completion rates; instead the feeling was simply that PGT students deserve some kind of support in the way that other students receive support.

Perceived impact

Instinctively and intuitively there is belief that the initiative works, and the feedback from students on the sessions is positive. Given that there was no provision whatsoever previously, there is a view that anything is better than nothing. More schools are now actively seeking the involvement of academic development in their work, which indicates that the profile of the initiative is increasing and the value of it is recognised.

Evidence of impact

No specific quantitative targets were set in terms of progression or retention, for example. Acknowledgement that the view of transition as development and change makes it difficult to evaluate or provide evidence of how students change. Staff have reviewed the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey free text responses, to review what students are saying they need more support with, rather than as a way of evaluating the success of the initiative itself. The numbers of students engaging with the initiative is viewed by the university as evidence of its success, as is the number of 'hits' received for online resources. A review of PTES results over the three years that the initiative has been running would require a much deeper level of engagement with a large amount of data. On the surface there has not been much of a change in the results (although questions change from year to year which makes comparison difficult), but this was not a goal of the initiative in the first place.

Views on what transition means

Language used refers to the university 'transitioning' students into, through and out of study, which implicitly locates responsibility for transition with the institution – it is something we do for, or to, the students. Explicit rejection of the notion of transition as a bounded construct that would suggest a time period, or a binary construct where students are 'in transition' or 'not in transition'. Instead transition is viewed as a gradual process of development or progression towards independence; but students do not begin or end their period of study as truly independent – they are constantly moving towards this. Explicit articulation of the view that different students will progress on this journey at different paces, and so will require different things. Yet the process must be supported by the institution, and it cannot simply be up to the individual student to grow and develop without any support. Focus on normalising (rather than problematizing) the transition experience, instead of assuming or expecting that

every student will already be 'good at' things like essay writing. For many students the transition will not be problematic and many students will progress without needing a great deal of support.

Engagement with/awareness of theory/concepts

Problematising transition puts students off seeking help – it has a negative impact on their self-efficacy and self-belief. Embedded in such notions of transition is the idea that if students require help then they are not good enough to be here, and this initiative is designed to turn that on its head and encourage students to take up support opportunities as a normal part of their development. The project leader came to this initiative from a non-education background and so the initiative itself was not driven by theory in the first instance. There was an identified need to put some kind of support in place quickly based on the perceived gap in provision, and this did not allow for lengthy engagement with theory in the first instance, but a focus on practice instead. PTES free text comments suggested that students want more opportunity to develop a network and feel part of an active community of students. Staff are now able to link this to work by O'Donnell et al. through socio-cultural theory and Wenger's Communities of Practice theory. Engagement with widening participation theory and concepts, in that any student from any background should be supported to complete a PGT programme and to realise their potential.

Perceived limitations of initiative

Resourcing and staff time. Highly devolved academic school structures so that establishing a cross-institutional support initiative that is nevertheless still viewed as an embedded part of the student experience, is challenging; also makes the process of change quite slow.

Future plans

The academic development centre is now at least in a dialogue with most of the academic schools about PGT support, even if not working directly with all of them. This represents progress in terms of the number of schools who engaged with the academic development centre previously. Staff would like to encourage schools to set aside opportunities for PGT students to just engage with academics as part of the broader university community, so that not all of the PGT students' contact is with doctoral students as teachers. The ultimate goal is to create a student experience in which this initiative is fundamentally intertwined with what happens in individual academic schools, so that students do not necessarily need to know or to understand who is responsible for each different bit of support or provision – there should be a seamless, one-stop-shop for students. There is a potential to link with the new personal tutoring system across schools at the university, by developing a set of reflective questions for personal tutors to use with PGT tutees.

Goodness of fit between theory and practice

The explicit focus of the support sessions is predominantly skills-based or information/signposting. This could be seen to sit at odds with the view of transition as personal development. However, in fact the focus of each session is almost 'incidental' and the overarching goal of the sessions is to provide networking opportunities, where students can meet with, hear from and learn through their engagement with a community of other students from a range of disciplines, and from staff and other experts. In reality, this is the important part of the sessions. The skills themselves are valuable, but students talking to other students about how they approach problems, and sharing their own approaches with others, is the really valuable part, and is what really supports development and change through talking (dialogue) and building confidence. The non-discipline specific nature of this initiative provides the platform and the structure for this to take place. This links to socio-cultural theory around transition. Also, the provision of support opportunities at specific identified points in the academic year links to Kift's work on transition pedagogy.

Initiative 4

Description of transition initiative

Peer Assisted Leaders scheme implemented in one department's undergraduate programme. A group of second year students undergo a one-day training event to become peer leaders. Thereafter they lead tutorial groups with first year students. Initially the scheme was run as a pilot with start up funding from HEFCE (teaching quality enhancement funds), and has now been rolled out more widely and has been continued. Peer leaders are paid for their training, but not for the subsequent tutorials. Initiative has been running for 8 or 9 years now. Following the training all peer leaders receive a handbook and a training manual. Peer leaders' tutorial sessions are timetabled into the first years' schedule of classes, so that there is an infrastructure that supports them. Tutorials usually take place every other week. Session content ideas are provided to the peer leaders which give an indication of what each tutorial might consist of, but the primary driver comes from the first years themselves, and what they want and need across the year. Peer leaders have a great deal of autonomy.

Rationale for initiative

Retention and aspiration were the primary drivers. To better understand why students were leaving, but from the students' own perspective, making use of students' own experiences of the challenges they faced in their studies, to support other students. Also trying to use more experienced students to raise the aspirations of new students beyond just trying to achieve a bare pass. Retention was a particular challenge in first year of the focal programme. Recruitment requires a great deal of effort, and so the university cannot afford to lose students. Peer leaders' tutorials are not skills focused, but are designed to provide an opportunity for students to talk to other students, to build confidence, share concerns, benefit from others' experiences. Also provides a platform for students to raise important issues with the learning development group within the department. Peers' explanations of higher education can be more powerful and more credible than advice or information that comes from tutors or staff. The initiative also provides an important learning and development opportunity for the peer leaders themselves, which raises their aspirations and gives them something important to add to their own CVs. Create genuine partnerships with students who are sufficiently empowered to go on and empower other students.

Perceived impact

Retention has improved. First year students who have been mentored by second year peer leaders are then able to progress into second year and input to the development and progress of the initiative themselves, with the benefit of the experience of having been a part of it, which provides an important learning opportunity. Peer leaders also have their own network and so they serve as a support to one another, as well as to the first years. First years have conversations with second years about issues that they wouldn't dream of raising with an academic personal tutor, for example. Staff and students believe this is an important initiative and valuable, otherwise it would not have been continued. Anecdotal feedback from staff indicates that they are receiving fewer questions or enquiries from students, because peer leaders are handling things well.

Evidence of impact

First year retention in the focal programme has risen from around 68% to over 90%. The initiative began in the days before KPIs, but the programme's retention rate was used as a starting point to focus on evidencing the impact of the initiative. The initiative is advertised to students, and there is strong uptake every year, so it is seen as a valuable and desirable activity to be involved in. Attendance at the peer leader tutorials can be monitored, and in the years of the initiative running, there has been only one instance of a group deciding not to attend their tutorials altogether. Evaluations of the peer leader tutorials are positive.

Views on what transition means

Smoothing the way into higher education through confidence-building and the development of social capital, with support for students to step outside their comfort zone, to become empowered and to be able to take charge of their own learning. Not about skills acquisition or information. Transition as facilitated by learning, not teaching. Learning through doing is central to this, not learning by being told how to do something.

Engagement with/awareness of theory/concepts

No explicit discussion or engagement with transition theory or concepts of transition, although various implicit theories and concepts embedded throughout.

Perceived limitations of initiative

The model is not embedded across the school and the university, and awareness of it is not high. Other examples of peer leadership principles are in operation across the institution. The initiative doesn't extend to third year students mentoring second years. There have been some attempts to address this in the past, particularly when there were large numbers of international students as direct entrants to second year, but this was not continued in the longer term. Final year students tend to be focused on their honours classification and are not as interested in other activities. There is something of a 'dip' in second year where students seem to take their eye off the ball, and are often engaged in placements during that year.

Future plans

Continued development and enhancement of the initiative through student engagement. Plans to roll the initiative out across the institution if possible, but led by others, using the lessons learned from this initiative as a starting point.

Goodness of fit between theory and practice

The initiative fits well with socio-cultural theory that focuses upon the significance of the development of relationships as key to development and change. The use of peer leaders to provide targeted support to first years at key points in the academic year also fits with Kift's transitions pedagogy model. Discussion of the development of social capital also fits with sociological explanations of transition. No explicit engagement with transition theory as driving practice, although these ideas are implicitly embedded throughout.

Initiative 5

Description of transition initiative

Focus on transition from HN to degree. Different approaches in different Schools. Associate Student Project - had 107 additionally funded places; 54 School of Engineering and 53 School of Computing. Each of the partners involved in these projects were slightly different hence different approaches in different Schools. In School of Engineering, the project is fed into three engineering programmes (civil engineering, electrical engineers and engineering systems). Each project works differently due to differences in programmes. HN students valued the opportunity to get on campus and finding out what their counterparts were doing and wanted reassurance they are doing the same at college (the sociocultural aspect).

Project involves having one lecturer that teaches in both HNC and HND to link Wenger's boundaries and having a consistent person they recognise. Also organises trips to campus. In School of Engineering someone responsible for project management and plays a role of 'broker', so gets people together in the university and the colleges; works with students; and musters support from colleagues and liaises with colleagues to get students to attend.

Also trying to encourage staff to think about transitions by offering some funding for research projects in specified areas e.g. internalisation. Transition is more than just change and research got staff thinking about the theoretical perspectives of transition.

Rationale for initiative

Project selected for the programmes based on demand for these types of places. Some perceived problems that needed addressing – identified transitions within transitions. E.g. One campus civil engineer students can do HNC, but need to travel to another campus for HND. In other campuses can do HNC, but then need to go to another campus for HND. This poses geographical problems for transitions and students struggle with 'nesting transitions'. Problems with different cultures between campuses too. Identifies need to be careful about what is meant by 'transition' – whether that's geographical or about becoming something. Recognition that more could be done to prepare students better for degree level. Further problems included losing students to other institutions

Perceived impact of initiative

Analysing data on how direct entrants to year 3 compare to university only students. Found there is no significant different in results, but significant difference in the degree classification. More work to be done on this and how they can stage an intervention.

What transition means in this context

Multi-layered idea of transition which involves a number of things. Large focus on geographical space and culture.

Engagement/awareness of concepts of transition

Engagement with Wenger's CoP theory – boundaries and brokers in particular. Trying to encourage others to engage in this literature, too. Read work by Gale and Parker and is inspired by Beach and his typology of transitions. Identifies that transitions are not always immediately progressive, but can be step in and step out. Students going on campus and back - that's mini transition.

Perceived limitations of initiative

Funding. Associate students attract funding, so that needs to continue.

It is difficult to organise shared events due to timetable issues and different academic years between colleges and university and students' part time work commitments etc.

Future plans for enhancement or initiatives

Have funding for next two year set in place. She won't be about colleges as much this year, so needs to think how she will replace that. Will go back and ask colleges if the university staff presence was valued. Still ironing out how to run things, but it will be inclusive. Will continue analysing data on student outcomes post-project.

Initiative 6

Description of transition initiative

Delivered by University across the whole of the sector, funded by the Scottish Funding Council. Looking at students who left before they completed their intended qualification – any UK student who attended University in Scotland or Scottish students who have attended University in England, Ireland or Wales. Interested in experiences or characteristics behind these students' decision making and offering them an IAG (information, advice and guidance) session with career advisors. Also gather data on these students to see what led to their decision. The initiatives is not to replace any retention services for students whilst still at university, it is a service to deal with students once they finished university. Started in 2012 and launched in 2013 – 7 universities provided contact data on students who left early and they would be contacted for an IAG session. From 2015-2016 have 5 new universities participating – so 12 in total providing contact data on early leavers to be contacted. Gather information from students about the support they received when entering university, how many hours they worked, gender, age etc. Trying to unpick characteristics of why students are leaving and feeding this back to universities to say what would work better.

Rationale for initiative

Was run in England initially until 2012. Scottish Funding Council approached institution and asked if could be offered in Scotland because although plenty of research is being conducted about why students leave University at their own universities, nothing about why students left University elsewhere. Also, lack of services for students to seek advice and guidance once they have left. The concern is the impact of early leavers on themselves and on the economy etc. So to support them and working out what happened to then feedback to the sector to see what helps and how can help.

Perceived impact of initiative

To provide universities with reasons why students left and their reason behind leaving early.

Evidence of impact

Some students got back in touch with their own university after contact with the project. Over 60% students say they want to go back to their original university. Not sure about the overall outcomes yet as too soon and have no real way of tracking students.

Views on what transition means in this context

Briefly mentions theory that exists to inform about first generation students. Doesn't mention transition.

Engagement with/awareness of theory/concepts of transition

No one else looking at the early leavers' transitions after they have left, so the hope is to bridge this gap.

Perceived limitations of initiative

Challenge of getting students to engage as most haven't heard of the project. Trouble getting in touch of students. The conversion/contact rate is 35-36% students, and less than that receive the information, advice and guidance. Finding that the earlier universities get student details to the initiative leader, the more likely the early leaver is to participate in the project. Some universities gather information and send at the end of the year in a chunk, but this is unhelpful because then contacting students who left 2 years ago and no longer need support and they don't engage.

Future plans

Need 1-2 years of project running to get feedback and to get more universities involved. Also looking at faster and better ways of contacting students.

Goodness of fit between theory and practice

Theory in sector in relation to retention. The project unpicks these issues further.

Initiatives 7 and 8

Two members of staff discussing two different initiatives they are involved in.

Initiative

Project 1: Academic Skills project initiated under the last enhancement theme and links to transition. The focus is on subject specific skills and workshops run locally in the Schools. Workshops are co-ordinated and delivered by PhD students so feeds into the transition from PhD student to future academic too. Project is in its second year of running. The programme helps with the transition from school to university and within the stages of university too and is now delivered in just over 50% of Schools in the university.

Project 2: Project not initially aimed at supporting transitions, but can now see the connections. Project is led by colleague in Management and is part of her research on widening participation and geographical boundaries and barriers to education. Initiative is still in planning stages, but it is a computer program that will ask school pupils a series of questions in relation to their interests, after which an analysis will suggest appropriate academic subjects that might be of interest to the pupils to pursue at university level study. Will be aimed at S5 pupils.

Rationale

Project 1: That it would be useful to support both UG and PG students' skills. Also to deliver subject-specific academic skills. Students find it difficult to identify that they are being taught these skills within modules (e.g. essay writing or time management), so wanted to extract these skills further through the initiative with the hope that students will buy into it more.

Project 2: To help school pupils make better informed choices about subject to study. Main motivation is to raise awareness of possibilities and to use computer programs for pupil's interests.

Evidence of impact

Project 1: Too early to tell yet. Doing additional research this year with a colleague from psychology who is interested in the relationship between how students identify with their discipline. So, if getting enough responses by the end of this year, might have a better idea of how students progress in terms of their identity as a historian or as a computer scientist and whether or not that means they are more likely to engage in deep learning.   Last year evidence was based on feedback evaluation forms and was very positive from students.

Depends what you mean by impact – is it improvements in grades or actually is it improvement in confidence? Playing by ear and changing as we go along.

Experience has been different in different Schools.

Project 2: – Hasn't started yet. Might ask students how effective they find the resource.

Views on what transition means

Project 1: Identity within the learning community and fully engaging in 'deep learning'. Transition for UG and PG students. Focus on development of skills.

Project 2: Taps into transitions by opening up thinking and raising awareness about academic subjects.

Engagement with/awareness of theory/concepts of transition

Project 1: Read about teaching for higher education. Engaged with Classic study skills handbook - Stella Cottrell's work and working with colleague in psychology and the idea of making students feel part of a community of learners could be a good way of getting them to engage in deep learning.

Project 2: Inspired by similar work undertaken in Belgian university and is built on the work of John Holland.

Perceived limitations

Project 1: Need to decide what we mean by 'impact'. Measuring the longer term impact can be problematic. Only in 2nd year and so engaging in trial and error. Continuity of PhD students delivering and co-ordinating workshops might be a challenge.

Project: Model might be overly simplistic and trying to work out if there really are correlations between S5 subject interests and what subjects should be studied at academic level.

Future plans

Project 1: Hoping to measure the impact of the workshops on student identity. Taking the Academic Skills project into the School of Science this year. Wish to have initiative running in as many subjects as possible. Hopes to expand into social media and online resources in the future. But that would involve time.

Project 2: Continue working on how this program might be useful in early stages of UG students. Some flexibility within subject choices in first couple of years, so would like to integrate this into helping 1st year students when they first arrive to choose subjects or when going into second year. Better than big course catalogue and telling students to go away and read it.

Goodness of fit between theory and practice

Project 1: Recently looked at theory and it supports what they believe, which is that students will engage if the initiative is delivered in a contextualised way.

Initiatives 9 and 10

Interview with members of staff from two different disciplines – psychology and sport.

Description of initiative in practice

Sport – Works mostly with 1st and 2nd years at UG level and a little bit with 3rd and 4th years too. Most transition work is focused on students coming into the university at various access points at UG level. E.g. with 1st year students from all walks of life. Smaller project with 2nd year students – particularly students who have missed 1st year and need to catch up e.g. study skills. Also contributes to employability skills for students leaving university at various exit points. Over last few years has worked on building study skills at start of modules and programmes e.g. referencing and essay writing. Provides students opportunity to engage in practices and to receive feedback. For example, citing three sources and receiving feedback on the quality of these references. New coursework pro forma where students now must detail what their weaknesses and how they have attempted to overcome them. If students choose not to do that, they receive 5% penalty. This is to encourage student participation in good habits.

Psychology - Works with 4th year single honours psychology students. Works on students' confidence and supports them to be more independent. That transition starts earlier, but it is covered in year 4 to set students up for moving on into the workplace. Initiative involves teamwork, leadership, communication and persuasion, and planning and organising. 4th year students are required to work on things uncomfortable with e.g. oral presentation etc. 4th year students get opportunity to teach statistics to 2nd year students. This builds 4th year students' leadership skills, and 2nd year student benefit through learning from 'one of us'. 4th year students also have ownership of a big section of a 4th year module and can plan small conferences etc.

Rationale for initiative

Sport – High number of students getting caught up in academic misconduct. So it was identified that more was needed to be done to support students on how to avoid this**.** Students were not aware of misconduct policy and didn't understand study skills.

Psychology – Students lacking certain skills and are not always equipped for the workplace.

Evidence of impact

Psychology – Monitors NSS results in terms of confidence and communication and how they compare with psychology across the sector. Seems to work as usually score around 90% for student confidence and communication. Had concerns that this initiative might have negatively impacted grades because it is taking up student time, but it actually led to better grades. Also gain evidence through module evaluation. 2nd year students respond well to being taught by 4th year students because they feel more comfortable asking questions and this reveals the weaknesses in their learning too. Community between these different level students is important. Students who take on leadership roles do better.

Sport – Student feedback from module evaluation and from a reduction in cases of plagiarism and academic misconduct.

What transition means in this context

Development of skills.

Sport – better understanding of processes.

Engagement/awareness of concepts of transition

Psychology – Not fully aware yet of the literature, but becoming informed and it works with the practice by coincidence.

Sport – Not based on theory, it's based on gut instinct and driven by students asking for it or staff recognising that greater support could be provided.

Perceived limitations of initiative

Psychology - grades as outcomes drives students away from learning these values we are trying to pass on/encourage. Unless you direct students otherwise, students will adopt an approach towards grades and achieving grades without recognising how important these values are.

Initiative

Lots of different initiatives going on. Each initiative is departmental. Hold induction for all 1st year students to do things like go over the student handbook and explain what is expected of students, assessment, and policy and procedures. Transition from HND to general degree is a massive leap for the students – particularly the move away from SQA system of assessments, so use different learning and teaching methods and formative assessment as much as possible in 1st and 2nd year to prepare the student for that transition. Transitional events to promote skills needed for progression. Each cohort has Advisor of Studies assigned to them – personal tutor. Meet as group and one-to-one discussions each term.

Other initiatives - trying to encourage staff to undertake pedagogic research to better understand these issues.

Working towards having a common one week induction for all 1st year students – students should be getting the same induction experience between campuses.

Rationale for initiative

Students are bombarded with information over the 2 day induction. Having this delivered over a week would be better. To support the transition taking place in each year of study. To treat every student as a potential honours degree student.

Evidence of impact

Evidence from progression and attainment of students. Student progression rates are good. Also based on student feedback.

Engagement/awareness of concepts of transition

Influenced by what is happening in the rest of the sector, through QA, through enhancement themes – knowledge of the sector and getting to see what's happening in other universities – helps guide what we do.

Future plans for enhancement or initiatives

Still new organisation so working towards having a common set of policies and procedures. To look at student feedback on induction, NUS results and other external evidence. To make sure all students on campus are getting the same experience.

Look further at the year 3 to year 4 transition in terms of what students expected versus what they got.

To collaborate with others and learn from the sector – sharing good practice. Collaborate with other institutions and see what is working for them that can be adopted here.

Perceived limitations

Funding might be an issue but should do what is best for students.

Initiatives 12 and 13

Description of initiative in practice

Focus of transition from College HN students to degree. B offers different initiatives to A. Two members of staff from these two campuses discuss their initiatives.

A - Focus on 2nd year because transition is from year 2 to year 3. Across HND second year the aim is to raise certain skills for entering degree level. Show students videos of previous degree students with them talking about differences between HN and degree. Encourage deeper reading to ensure students can cope with what is required of them in transition to degree. Provide support on referencing to ensure they are engaging in proper practice. Providing information on the realities of university – time management guidance etc. Transition workshop event takes place in May before going into 3rd year and makes students clear on what is expected of them. They get to speak with previous successful students to answers some of their questions and to meet some of the degree students. Technology – students must be comfortable using VLEs , so provide some of that in year 2. In year 3 and 4 some of the modules are entirely online so offer a second year unit online to ensure students are prepared. Support the transition through personal academic tutoring – meeting 3 times per year. Identifying what students want to do and sending them way with material to set them up for degree level.

B - Not as many initiatives as A as have less students progressing to degree. Hope to learn from what is working from A. Work with students on exercises such as teamwork with 6 students across all modules, emphasising to students why it is so important. Show students job adverts asking for evidence of teamwork and explain that these exercises are building on their employability skills. Also work on familiarising students with turnitin so this does not pose a problem for them at degree level and as a developmental tool for academic writing.

Rationale for initiative

A - Felt they were not preparing students for move on to degree. The HN course is very different to the degree course. HN is competency-based with lots of assessment. Students struggled with the transition and looked lost. Needed to address this as more students are making the transition to degree. Got involved with pilot with SQA to look at assessment but SQA did not allow changes to assessment.

Perceived impact of initiative

B - Down to the lecturer to have the skills to motivate and tasking your people to focus like a manager. Students need the scaffolding and different teaching strategies for different groups to support transition.

Evidence of impact

A – No students knocking on the door with concerns. Don't have an actual overview but based on what students have fed back.

B – Huge increase in retention. Not been replicated this year due to a different approach, so aims to return to what seemed to work.

What transition means in this context

Change in skill required of student.

Engagement/awareness of concepts of transition

A – not engaged with concepts of transition.

B – Not looked at theory specifically on transitions. Instead, links it to concepts of motivations and situational leadership. Applying this concept to improve transitions.

Perceived limitations of initiative

A - HN association with SQA means cannot make changes to assessment. E.g. wanted one assessment to be an essay, but SQA did not allow this.

B - The HN structure is in contrast to the degree, but cannot change to support better transitions. Unless have resources it is difficult. Moved to a new campus, but it is too small. Previously it was an old campus with plenty of room. Now not enough space for tutorials. So will try and focus on what can be achieved with the resources available.

Future plans for enhancement or initiatives

A - Try and bring SDL into play and social element of learning. Need to scaffold along the way. Push the value of experiential learning and the social aspects of learning and motivational aspects of the teacher.

B – Will work on more case studies and review student feedback and maybe go back and ask students if they felt the initiatives helped prepare them for degree study.

Contact us