

'It's my sort of new life so to speak' – students' experiences of transition to higher education in the Long First Year project

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Abstract

The process of transitioning to Higher Education (HE) is challenging. This paper reports on an institutional research project at the University of Lincoln called the Long First Year. The project takes a holistic view of the factors influencing student retention and involves staff and students from across the institution. Comprised of three phases, the first phase included interviews with current students about their experiences and views of transition. Outputs from current transition projects were fed into phase two which culminated in a day-long workshop involving academic and professional services staff and students. The final phase of the project will implement and evaluate the action plans which emerged from the workshop. This account of research in progress reflects on the transition experiences of current students as revealed in the qualitative data collection and analysis used to inform the project in phase one and the resulting set of guiding principles for future initiatives which are in development.

Introduction

The process of transitioning to Higher Education (HE) is undoubtedly challenging.¹ Students not only experience new ways of learning in this environment but changes in living situations and routines coupled with the loss and adjustment of family and friends support networks requires adaptation and resilience. Previous studies have shown that 'being and becoming' a university student is an intensely emotional experience (Christie et al., 2008, p.567) and social integration is essential for retention (Wilcox et al., 2005). Fitting in can be challenging and a university's 'values and practices [or] institutional habitus' (Thomas, 2002, p.423) can facilitate or arrest this depending on its processes and activities. Transition needs to start early with a clear and coherent programme with targeted and individual attention by enthusiastic deliverers (Briggs et al., 2012).

At the University of Lincoln (UoL), a project to review the transitioning of students to their first year of study was initiated in late 2018. Called the 'Long First Year' (LFY) to reflect how Level One study can feel to students, the project is divided into three

¹ The authors would like to thank all the students who participated in this study.

parts and is engaging staff from across the university and students in an active conversation about achieving 'engaged retention'. Phase one of the project has asked 'what is happening now?' gathering primary data from current students about their experiences. Outputs from current transition projects have also been considered by the project team to feed into phase two. This is the analysis and planning stage, which culminated in a day-long workshop involving academic and professional services staff and students. A series of interactive activities developed a time line of transition at the university as it currently stands, and action plans for changes and new initiatives. The final phase of the project will implement these action plans and evaluate any new initiatives.

This paper reflects on the transition experiences of University of Lincoln students as revealed in the qualitative data collection of phase one.

Method

Research interviews were undertaken with students during October 2018 following receipt of ethical approval from the School of Education Ethics Committee in September 2018. An institutional researcher (RS) recruited volunteers via an email promoted by the project leader (LM) to Programme Leads. Both new and returning students were included in order to generate a full picture of transition from recent and more retrospective perspectives. A semi-structured approach was used, asking questions based on key areas of interest the project team had identified and based on a review of the literature by the project lead. Questioning was based on the timeline of transition – the first day, week and months of university life. For each stage students were asked to consider positives and negatives of their experiences. Interviews with the students were audio recorded with their permission and transcribed verbatim; they ranged in length from 16 to 53 minutes. Descriptive-interpretive analysis of the transcripts (Elliott and Timulak, 2005) alongside field notes was undertaken by the researcher and the main findings were conveyed in a written report to the project lead and shared with colleagues at the LFY workshop.

Results

In total, data from 13 students was collected and analysed from 11 face to face interviews and two email interviews. As the time scale for recruitment, data collection and analysis was a matter of weeks, the researcher was reliant on volunteers;

however, the participants included students from Year 1 (n=4), Year 2 (n=3), Year 3 (n=2) and Year 4 (n=4). The majority of participants were female (n=9), White British (n=11), had a disability, mental health condition or specific learning difficulty (n=7), and were aged 21 and under (n=7). All the participants were UK domiciled students studying full time.

First day emotions

Students reflected on a mix of negative (sad, anxious, scared, nervous, and overwhelmed) and positive (excited, happy, and fun) emotions on arrival at Lincoln. Their focus during their early arrival was often very practical – how they felt moving into their accommodation and meeting new flatmates or housemates (awkward, busy and stressed).

Initial anxiety was often relieved by the realisation that there were others in the same situation. Anxiety was heightened in students who had not gone straight to university – for example Student 1 had a gap year, and he worried that a lot of the new people he would meet would be a year younger than himself. However, he actually found it was a lot less intimidating once he was here and he quickly socialised with new people: ‘It turns out I can actually socialise with people in a normal manner’ (Student 1).

Other students used immediate family and friends for support during arrival. One student’s older brother had attended Lincoln and his girlfriend started on the same day, and so he reflected on how others arriving without these factors or from further afield might find it ‘a very scary experience’ (Student 3). Previous visits helped some students settle in more quickly, highlighting the important role of offer holder days:

Slightly nervous just because it’s a new environment, like I said, I’m four and a half hours away, I’d only been here twice before, but I was also quite excited, all the emotions really (Student 2).

Participants also reflected on the ‘new start’ they had undertaken on arrival at Lincoln, in a positive, opportunistic manner ‘It was quite nice to think this is my space... it’s my sort of new life so to speak’ (Student 5). For others, this new start was less positive, either because of their own circumstances or because of the impact of others around them. Student 8’s first day at university differed in that she missed the first week of her course. Prior to attending Lincoln she had been studying

part time at college and accreditation of prior HE study meant she began in year two of the degree. She is also a mature student who commutes to university. She recalled feeling a strong sense of isolation on her first day as she went straight into lectures where she did not know any of her course mates:

So I was just straight into lectures trying to play catch up so that didn't help. Cos I'd missed all the Fresher's. All the information that was one of my frustrations, all of the information that I kept getting was geared to actual first years but for some reason it wasn't coming through for the equivalent of second years (Student 8).

For one student with mobility issues, the practical aspects of arrival were very challenging and working out how to get around the campus was his biggest challenge.

First day enablers and disablers

Whilst emotions were high, the practical university systems and peer to peer support helped students navigate their first day effectively and procedures generally worked effectively:

Obviously the whole system that the university has in place is very efficient... they can't help the fact that there are about a thousand students all coming here together. I mean we were lucky because we had the last moving in slot of the day [...] the only thing I would say is that 15 minutes is a very aspirational target for anyone to unload their stuff (Student 1).

We made a little group on Facebook messenger and that eased a lot of sort of the awkwardness and stress and anxiety of moving in (Student 5).

Other enablers included university staff and other students, especially when particular challenges were involved:

The initially most helpful people were the Student Wellbeing Team, my course leader and some members of the IQ (accommodation provider) team, who helped me to manage the disabilities I have along with what I was doing at the time, such as allowing my disabled mum to stay for longer amounts of time in the car park [...] The Student Wellbeing Team got my learning support plan up and running very fast (Student 4).

Navigation around the campus proved a challenge for many, and was often one of the biggest challenges on the first day:

I think Sunday morning I decided to explore and I got lost. I actually had no idea where I was and it turned out I was just behind the Joseph Banks area so I was just there behind Morrison's but I didn't know where I was so I think it kind of hit me that, actually, I don't know where I am (Student 11).

The First Week Blur?

In the main participants found the structure of the first week to be a useful framework to help them settle in to university life. Participants went along to Fresher's Week activities, the Societies Fair and Welcome Talks. They began to learn more about what was expected from them on their programmes. They met with their personal tutor. They explored the city and discovered where supermarkets were located. They learnt about what support services were available to them and where they were found. These, and the visibility of the support available to them, were viewed as positive aspects of the first week:

My personal tutor really helped. He was really friendly and made you feel relaxed [...] you had two personal tutor meetings during your first week and he would ask [...] how are you getting on generally? (Student 6).

I think I spoke to Student Support and they helped with the different bits and bobs I needed, knowing I could get Council Tax support [...] Oh and the Wellbeing Centre [...] so I checked in with them because I have my mental health difficulties (Student 8).

However, the sheer volume of information delivered to students during this time proved challenging for some. Student 2 felt that it was very hectic and she felt 'slightly overwhelmed' with all the information that she received on the first day of her degree whilst acknowledging that the information itself was very helpful: 'Just all at once on the first week, it was in a way, a bit too much' and having some awareness of the course prior to enrolment, she knew it would be very full on from the beginning: 'It felt like you were getting one piece after another and it didn't feel like it was going to stop' (Student 2).

Alcohol was a divider between groups, with some students embracing the social side of Fresher's Week 'It's a drunken blur mostly' (Student 5), whilst one student described moving flats because they did not want to drink and their flatmates did not respect this. Inevitably, there were also comments on the alcohol basis for some social events: 'What didn't help is the amount of alcohol-based prizes, as I don't drink!' (Student 4).

Moving on – the first few months

There is a clear picture of emerging identities and routines as the students described their first few months and longer term settling in process. Peer support and friendships were crucial, both through informal social events and via university led peer mentoring schemes. Participants described a growth in confidence as they learnt to develop schedules, live well and manage money: 'I've pretty much stuck to the budget' (Student 2).

Support continued to be much appreciated, and different sources were mentioned:

Like you could go on Blackboard and access things through there and they've got the Wellbeing on there as well. I think the university does really well with providing the students with a lot of information (Student 5).

Personal Tutors were highlighted as a key relationship throughout the extended settling in period. In particular the 'open door policy' (Student 12) was highlighted as helpful in building rapport. For those students where this relationship did not continue an opportunity was missed:

The Personal Tutor meetings for three weeks in a row then it stopped. I think that was a little bit short. I think we should have had that Personal Tutor meeting for five weeks, or six or seven [...] expecting students to be all settled in after three weeks is a bit ambitious (Student 1).

Challenges continued to be both practical and emotional, with loneliness, isolation and homesickness common: 'Some loneliness, missing my dogs and family' (Student 4).

I was missing home a lot... but now it doesn't bother me... I missed the first day of Eid... and I cried and I wished I was at home (Student 11).

Commuter students described the challenge of networking with peers when time was often spent travelling. Academic challenges included workload and the helpfulness of staff to assist with issues:

We had a scenario with one of our modules in Psychology where each chapter was about 40 pages and we were given 6 chapters on the course for three weeks... but we also had three other modules as well so for just coming into the first year that was terrifying (Student 3).

Some members of the teaching staff were a little rude to me and did not take my concerns seriously – particularly during group work, when some group members put in little to no effort and their lack of participation affected my grades too (Student 13).

Finally, the assumption that all students drink alcohol continued to impact on the transition of some students: ‘Just the expectation of it is sometimes difficult’ (Student 9).

Discussion

A number of key strengths, opportunities and specific vulnerabilities of certain student groups have been identified through the thematic analysis of the interview data.

Strengths include the support services available to students, and the key processes such as Welcome Week and Personal Tutoring which help scaffold transition to HE. Students are increasingly developing their own peer to peer support mechanism through social media, and they build relationships quickly on arrival through their accommodation, course and social activities. Perhaps the plethora of arrival and orientation activities alongside induction activities as described by participants here in that blur of the first week could be reconfigured to avoid overwhelming new students. As Morgan states in her Student Experience Practitioner Model, arrival and orientation including making friends and settling in take place very quickly often in the first two weeks whereas induction to university study takes much longer, arguably.

Until a student goes through at least one academic cycle (e.g. studying for a module and submitting coursework and sitting exams), they have not been inducted into the process of study (Morgan, 2012b, 22).

It is clear where there exist further opportunities for the university to enhance support including more frequently scheduled meetings with Personal Tutors – students do not always feel able to initiate contact themselves in the early days of this key relationship. Communication of information could also be improved – for example a ‘Refresher’s Week’ for late arrivals was mentioned and this already exists. Opportunities also exist around assumptions that new students all socialise with alcohol – this is clearly not the case, and more consideration should be made of this. This should be reflected in the attitudes of all staff on campus.

There are key groups of students who should be specifically supported during the challenge that is transition to HE. Information needs to be tailored – for example for commuter students, gap year or mature entrants. As Morgan warns, providing this support can be ‘complex’ to both ‘comprehend and deliver’ but is what is required in today’s HE environment (2012a, 3). Disabled students also require bespoke support, and this is clearly happening for many already. These students could all benefit from meeting others in similar situations early on in their transition period.

There are clear limitations to the interview data in terms of the small number of self-selecting student volunteers although the participants were drawn from across the university and represented a blend of gender, age, year of study and programme. Participants were all UK domiciled students and the project would benefit from drawing on data with non-UK domiciled students. The interview transcripts and field notes were analysed using a descriptive-interpretive approach (Elliott and Timulak, 2005) where the focus of the data analysis is naturally guided by the research questions. This approach was a good fit for the LFY project since collection of data involves giving power to the participants as the researcher encourages them to ‘take the lead and to point out important features of the phenomenon as they see it’ (Elliott and Timulak, 2005, 151) as well as make suggestions for improvement. Validation of the analysis was secured by sharing the results at the LFY workshop in order to obtain feedback. The use of theoretical sampling, the ‘collection of more cases’ and multiple qualitative analysts could all improve the validity of the data and subsequent analysis (Elliott and Timulak, 2005, 156). However, the issues surrounding transition were broadly consistent with what is identified from the literature relating to this aspect of the student experience.

The data clearly demonstrates the development of ‘institutional habitus’ (Thomas, 2002, 423) as students described values, practices and behaviours they associated with the institution. The environment supported or inhibited the transition process as described by students with disabilities, who struggled when the environment was not appropriate for them. This is also echoed in the challenges of students who do not drink alcohol and felt the environment did not align with this behaviour. It is therefore important for the culture of the institution to adjust to accommodate all students, whatever their background, needs and preferences.

The seven transition factors described by Bowles et al. (2014) were all clearly described by participants – study, effort, culture, orientation, learning@university, facilities and social interaction. As this study points out, institutions should focus on the university-led factors and ensure they are peer-led so that they are effective. Hence orientation week practicalities, learning@university (online resources), facilities for new students and well publicised social events should all have student input. Furthermore, the three student-led inherent factors of study skills, effort (motivation) and culture (feelings of belonging) could all be highlighted during initial contact with staff as features that will assist students with their own transition to HE. This would enhance the transition period.

The student voice is a powerful motivator for change in HE, and especially in an institution such as Lincoln which prides itself on providing an excellent student experience. Retention of students is crucial in the early days of university life, and this is facilitated through a number of practical and emotional factors as these data demonstrate. The LFY is taking a holistic view of the factors influencing retention (Morgan, 2012a). This study has informed the next steps of the LFY project, not least a key set of guiding principles for the initiatives which will be developed. These are:

Peer input – initiatives should be informed by our current students to ensure relevancy.

Longitudinal process – transition to university does not occur in one week. Induction should be seen as a yearlong process, structured around key touch points.

Personalisation – students have a huge range of different needs and where possible we should provide options and a personalised approach.

Beyond year one – the first year of study is just the start of university. Induction should not stop at the end of this time period.

Lincoln Family – all activities and initiatives should aim at building a community feel to the Lincoln experience. The concept of family is important – family supports, provides constructive feedback and engenders trust in all participants.

Fulfilled retention – we should not just aim for retention and continuation of our students – we should aim beyond this, at ‘fulfilled retention’ where students experience all that Lincoln has to offer, developing key personal and employability skills.

Balancing support and resilience – supporting our students is crucial, but we should also encourage resilience and independence through this support.

The project group will now progress some action plans, informed by these principles, demonstrating the value of the interview data which fed into phase two of the project. The final phase of the project will implement these plans and evaluate any new initiatives.

Appendix 1

Long First Year video: the following film includes short interviews with current university students as part of the Long First Year project created by students from the Digital Education & Student Life student video team. The video interviews were included in the same ethical review process as the audio interviews detailed in the article.

<https://youtu.be/x8Qo6mNLAr4>

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