

# Student Transition in Higher Education in Western Counties Revisited: Addressing and Mediating Challenges, A Holistic Approach

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## ABSTRACT

Transitioning into Higher Education (HE) is the process whereby students take the plunge into the unfamiliar and engage in an entirely different context which triggers an array of concurrent changes, environmental, social, academic even financial. Transition is a matter of real importance to both individuals and institutions as unsuccessful transition means higher drop-out rates – currently averaging 40%. The paper first explores the theoretical underpinnings through the models of Tinto (1975)- linear perspective with emphasis on social assimilation, Nicholson (1990) - four-stage cyclical concept moving from preparation to stabilization - and Elander (2010) - introducing pedagogic practice. In the second part, challenges regarding suitable address are investigated. Challenges, being influenced by individual characteristics, social engagement, and pedagogic factors, need interventions which should be adequately customised to take account of all relevant dimensions. Different views of transition (induction, development or as being and becoming) are acknowledged, which may entail a different approach necessitating diverse courses of action. In

this context, recommendations are outlined where all three perspectives are addressed. Academic: Pre-entry programmes with sufficient duration, offering assessment workshops, enhancing students' epistemological beliefs, and developing realistic course expectations. Social: setting up social facilities, collaborative learning and teaching strategies, consistent support from staff. Personal: self-empowerment work, drawing upon older graduates lived experience. Taking a comprehensive, holistic approach and engaging the whole of the student rather than the part could potentially change the scene and produce more positive outcomes.

**Keywords:** Higher Education Transition; Western Countries; Recommendations; Educational Psychology

## STUDENT TRANSITION INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

Transition into Higher Education (HE) is defined as the internal process when students take the plunge into the unfamiliar attempting to acclimatize to HE while *responding to cultural, social and cognitive challenges* (Perry & Allard, 2003, p. 75). The new learning environment constitutes

an entirely different context triggering an array of concurrent changes, environmental, social, academic even financial (Cheng et al., 2015), making the students' response to them a multifaceted issue worthy of close examination. It has been suggested that factors at play shaping student response can be previous educational and life experiences (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998), preparedness and expectations of HE (Lowe & Cook, 2003; Thomson et al., 2021). Clearly, the challenges involved afflict both students and institutions (Briggs et al., 2012) since unsuccessful transition will mean higher drop-out rates with students less likely to continue in HE (Kantanis, 2000). With the average dropout rate for college undergraduates sadly averaging 40% (Education Data Initiative [EDI], 2021), this transition may well distance from successful study and achievement (Hultberg et al., 2008), and is, therefore, of real importance (Hussey & Smith, 2010) to both parties concerned.

As supported by emerging literature (Gravett & Winstone, 2019), a student's transition into HE is largely a non-linear complex experience. The move from school to university is acknowledged as a huge leap towards independence and autonomy - personal, social, and academic - for most students (Kyndt et al., 2017). This shift produces multiple challenges in all areas of the student's life impacting disproportionately some student groups (Coertjens et al. 2017). The student will need to integrate into the college structure (organizational and academic) while at the same time grow personally and develop a social profile sufficient to keep them afloat, which in turn requires remarkable social and emotional adjustment (Young et al. 2019). Shifting from the controlled environment of school and family to taking on accountability for personal life is not only highly demanding (Belfield et al. 2017) but also amounts to a significant developmental step in their journey into adulthood (Young et al. 2019) – a parameter oftentimes understated by the literature (Le &

Wilkinson, 2018) leaving relevant experiences underexplored (O'Donnell et al., 2016).

Turning to relevant supporting theories, Tinto (1975) speaks of transition in a linear way whereby successfully transitioning entails social assimilation first and academic next (Timmis et al., 2022) with background factors –family, personal attributes, and pre-schooling experiences- constituting the basis of the model. Individual qualities, as described, impact individual commitment which will influence the next phases. Social integration will come as a result of meaningful interactions with peers, lecturers and staff, even participating in extra - curricular activities (Naylor et al., 2021). This is conducive to commitment, which if minimal, the integration will be limited, too, increasing the drop-out risk (Hdjari et al., 2022). Tinto's model, (Elander et al., 2010) presents transition in the light of student withdrawal, namely failure of the student to effectively integrate with the institution, which, however, is a '*deficit model, focusing on a negative outcome*' (Elander et al., 2010, p.2). Moreover, albeit quite influential, the model has not been fully tested empirically as some of the elements are not accurately specified. In fact, in one of the few tests of the model as a whole, path analysis testing the overall fit between the model and the statistical relationships among the measured elements, came up with indices demonstrating that the model was not an adequate explanation for the dataset (Brunsdon et al., 2000). Indeed, failing to withdraw, important as it may be, is only the minimum requirement for successful HE transition, the goal of which should be academic in essence as universities are mainly places of learning (Elander et al., 2010) and therefore, progression, achievement and eventually graduation are all constituent parts of the process. Consequently, institutions should make an effort to enhance students' learning experiences bringing students' interest, motivation and experience to the forefront (York & Longden, 2004).

Nicholson (1990), on the other hand, described transition as a cyclical concept comprising 4 stages: *preparation, encounter, adjustment and stabilization*. In the preparation stage, students need to reach a state of preparedness before entering HE and develop accurate and realistic expectations coupled with a positive predisposition to change (De Clercq et al., 2018). Like in Tinto's model, personal characteristics are crucial to commitment and will shape the next phases. Encounter refers to adjustability, being able to change initial beliefs/knowledge to match actual context, which requires making sense of one's coping ability and building relationships with others (Timmis et al., 2022). Adjustment designates self-regulation ability through personal growth and change aiming at better adaptation to the new context. These two stages sound similar to Tinto's social and academic integration, the difference being that Tinto presents social integration underscoring belonging as a prerequisite to aid academic integration, a distinction not made by Nicholson (De Clercq et al., 2018). Finally, *stabilisation* is the stage when students come to terms with the behaviour required for satisfactory social and academic results (Nicholson, 1990). Similarly, Purnell and Foster (2008) describe a positive model with the same stages whereby student 'engagement' translates into spending time learning with others inside and outside the classroom through educational and extra-curricular tasks, appreciating perspectives other than their own, eventually leading to academic competence.

Elaborating on these models, Elander and colleagues (2010) come up with a more modern one which introduces teaching methods and pedagogic practice. This places the quality of learning at the heart of the transition as a factor that clearly affects outcomes and has the potential to produce positive results. In this line of thinking, Elander brings up Bloom's taxonomy - highly influential as a tool for educational

planning and learning evaluation (Bloom et al., 1954; Krathwohl, 2002). This is a hierarchy that starts with knowledge (memorizing and remembering) and moves progressively through comprehension, application, analysis, to the highest levels of synthesis and evaluation. Thus, arguably, a successful transition could be understood and standardized as progression from understanding to application and from analysis to synthesis (Bloom's taxonomy), or as progress to written work demonstrating relational and abstract understanding -SOLO taxonomy (Biggs & Collis, 1982). As in this model there is emphasis on preparation - even pre-transition- relevant interventions with this focus become of the essence since they could contribute to students producing better written work (Elander et al., 2004). Considering this section, in transition students will navigate around independent learning and living and experience challenging new social and academic environments. In the process, friction might be experienced between personal learning beliefs and behavior and the new learning context, affecting, and shaping the formation of their new identity as a student. To develop this identity, they will adopt new perceptions relating to the academic culture and create a social network to help them handle the demands and opportunities in HE (Coertjens et al., 2017). This translates into significant stressors calling for suitable interventions, which brings us to the second part of this assignment.

### **ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE: INTERVENTIONS**

Transition, being multi-layered, involves three broad classes of influences, individual characteristics (personal and academic-related), social engagement/peer relations and finally pedagogic factors, such as teaching styles. Understandably, to successfully deal with the challenges, the aforementioned influences will have to be addressed through relevant interventions.

To start with, if transition is seen as a distinct period of time at the beginning of a student's HE itinerary, it is clear why first year experiences and Pre-transition/foundation courses come into the picture. In this transition-*as induction*- view (Gale & Parker, 2014), the institution is responsible for helping the students to suitably adjust socially and academically in order to fully take part in university life. Thus, a carefully designed and properly implemented induction programme has the potential to facilitate smooth transition by offering necessary information on the academic and social culture familiarizing new students with conventions and accepted norms of behavior as well as opening up opportunities for engagement. Hence, activities offered will commonly attempt to prepare both academically (Hultberg et al., 2008) and socially (Brooman and Darwent, 2014) for what is required ahead enabling effective adjustment (Coertjens et al., 2017).

However, student agency is also of the essence, as individual motivation, willingness to engage in learning and social opportunities with other students and staff largely depends on the students themselves. Thus, motivation, be it extrinsic or intrinsic, can well serve as a predictor of students' learning behaviours -learning strategies, engagement, handing in assignments (Pekrun et al., 2007)-, performance and achievement (Pintrich, 2004), even dropout from school, which is why it is also a matter of concern.

If transition is viewed as *development*, then it is not associated with a particular point in time but is a complex process of transformation. Consisting of various changes in individuals' values, beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, and skills, it will eventually trigger shifts in both learning, maturity, and self-concepts (Hussey & Smith, 2010). This resonates Briggs et al.'s (2012) model of the formation of learner identity which supports that this formation is pivotal to successful transition and states that it may begin well before university entry. Accordingly, the university itself and

the student's educational environments before HE entry can also greatly influence learner identity. In this context, too, induction activities have often proven valuable in aiding student transition into HE (Cabrera et al., 2013).

Moreover, if transition is viewed as *being and becoming* involving "*revisions in identity and agentic affiliations*" (O'Shea, 2013, p.139), then a more fluid nature is suggested. In this understanding, "student" is not something fixed but what one *becomes* through a complex process, while navigating through various learning and social occasions during the whole of the first year in HE, not just the first week (Pennington et al., 2018). Transition being a learning experience lasting throughout the whole first year, getting familiarized with place, culture, practices of the new study context (Gregersen et al., 2021) will happen gradually through engagement in relevant learning activities in-house or extra-curricular through which the specifics of the culture will be understood and a student identity will be formed (Leese, 2010).

Bearing the above in mind, with specific reference to academic challenges, attention should be given to the role played by students' beliefs about knowledge ('epistemological beliefs') as they are quite closely linked to approaches to learning. These can vary from 'naïve' (knowledge is an accumulation of facts originating externally) to 'sophisticated' (knowledge evolves, learner in interaction builds inter-related concepts involving enquiry and evaluation) (Hofer & Pintrick, 1997). When students start university, it is very common to have naïve epistemological beliefs as teaching practices and expectation at pre-university level vary greatly with university education. At secondary school, as shown by a comparative study of teaching methods in A-levels teaching (Ballinger, 2003), students depended on teacher-provided content, autonomous study was not expected of them, and analytic skills were hardly required or developed, whereas for university students there was a high



expectation of autonomy, and the development of critical and analytical skills was required for assessment. Moreover, surveys of students demonstrate their complaint at the fact that pre-university teaching practices did not prepare them for university (Smith, 2004). Therefore, intervention programmes have been implemented to improve students' study skills and learning beliefs early in the transition but have had mixed results. To cite an example, participation in such a study skills programme offered just before entry to HE showed improved student retention and achievement (Knox, 2005), and there was some evidence of increasing participation and student retention in institutions that provided preparatory programmes before student enrolment (Yorke & Thomas, 2003). However, other study skills interventions for first year university students have met with limited success mainly because they were offered separately from subject teaching and were quite generic (Scouller, 1998; Hattie et al., 1996).

Another common problem for students lies in writing assignments to meet more challenging assessment criteria. As Pain and Mowl (1996) report, in one sample almost half of first-year students had difficulties with essays, while in another sample, 78% could not tell what markers expected from their essays, with mismatches of understanding being common since students and staff interpret criteria quite differently (Harrington et al, 2006a). Relevant interventions on understanding writing criteria have been designed and delivered in the form of interactive workshops with a practical element of marking peer exercises (Bloxham & West, 2004), generally giving positive results and demonstrating improvement both in understanding and in performance. Meeting these seven core skills (*addressing the question, demonstrating understanding, critical evaluation, developing arguments, structuring, using evidence, and using academic language*) (Elander et al, 2004)

entails application and analysis rather than just memorizing, and therefore -as complex skills- they correspond to deep approaches to learning (Elander et al, 2006), which brings us back to the Bloom taxonomy as an assessment tool. Plus, they call for a shift in epistemological beliefs.

Moreover, workshops aiming at developing a deeper learning approach have been used to evaluate and apply understanding of core criteria by a study conducted in three institutions (Aston, Liverpool Hope and London Metropolitan) and results were generally promising but also met with obstacles that detracted from their effectiveness (Harrington et al. 2006). Low attendance, variability of tutors and the perception that they were rather remedial and not connected to subject matter had a detrimental effect on the programme. This said, as epistemological beliefs can considerably influence transitional learning, then creating suitable interventions to trigger more sophisticated learning beliefs would be greatly beneficial.

This begs the following question: could pre-university interventions help students better understand core criteria and direct themselves towards a more successful transition into HE? The question has been partly answered by a study evaluating a core criteria workshop intervention for A-level and Access students at a further education college. The results albeit modest were promising as workshops showed reduced self-rated understanding and ability and increased sophistication of students' approach to essay writing (Jessen & Elander, 2009). Still, striking the right balance between enhancing chances of successful transition to HE and minimizing potential disruption to the facts- and-content nature of pre-university learning will have to be ensured.

Regarding **the social part of transition challenges**, the literature suggests that building social ties and social integration prove essential for successful social and learning transitions (Wilcox et al., 2005). More specifically, as corroborated by

multiple studies, active student contact with peers and staff is found to correspond to more learning gains in HE especially in the first year (Brouwer et al. 2016) and leads to college retention and lower dropout rates (Mallette & Cabrera, 1991; Tinto, 1998), with the concept of belongingness taking central position in students' identity (Solomon, 2007).

In this vein, Thomas describes students' networks of friends and contacts as the 'social capital' necessary to counteract social barring at university and proposes three solutions for enhancing social networks: *communal living arrangements, social facilities, and collaborative learning and teaching strategies* (Thomas, 2002). Interventions featuring a social element have been used even in the field of pedagogic practice, such as attempts to improve teaching methods through the use of students' peer interaction. Along these lines, Tinto (1997) reports a 'coordinated study programme' specifically made to cater for both social and academic needs, which engaged students and tutors in cooperative learning tasks across disciplines, which proved successful for re-enrolment. As supported by Tinto, this goes further to underscore that creating interventions which combine academic and social involvement in shared learning experiences boosts learner identities through enhancing social affiliations, which in turn can serve as a tool towards increased academic motivation and involvement.

Finally, in a study among first-year Dutch students investigating social interaction, sense of belonging and first-year academic performance, the results showed enhanced peer and faculty communication both formal and informal and higher grades attained in the first courses (Herpen et al., 2020). This further corroborates the view that participation in pre-university programmes could ease the transition and offer a head start in HE. If a four-day intervention appears to work, then it also makes sense that expanding the duration of the programmes to last throughout the year

could well produce more effective results both for transition and for increased performance.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Admittedly, a whole array of interventions has been researched aiming at facilitating student transition into HE. Some were encouraging, however, there seem to be no straightforward solutions which guarantee to counter all relevant challenges. The stance taken in this paper is that to make HE transition successful; the intervention needs to be implemented much earlier than actual entry with a sufficient duration for good results.

To start with, pre-entry programmes (Nicholson, 1990) promote student engagement in preparation work targeting the development of realistic course-specific expectations. However, clarifying and altering expectations is not only time consuming but requires other types of cognitive and emotional growing, too (Pekrun, 2011). Thus, induction lasting one or more weeks is clearly not adequate as transition is a continuous process through at least their first year of study (Purnell, 2002), while some may still be transitioning in their further years of study (Gale and Parker, 2014). Therefore, it is important that adequate contact time with academic staff/tutors is provided to ensure support (Holmegaard et al., 2014) needed throughout the whole year as students gradually take ownership of their learning (Wilson et al., 2016). Introducing a nuanced approach offering professional services with trained staff, for example a study coach, to whom the students can turn for help and advice will be greatly beneficial. The 'go and see' policy will strengthen the student-staff relationship, and student confidence within the academic context will be increased as will willingness to ask for support (Morosanu et al., 2010). Moreover, as suggested by focus groups, students calling staff by first names and being able to contact them plus staff offering help, taking interest in students' work and treating them

as equals will increase students' self-esteem and motivation granting the feeling of deserving and receiving respect. This mentality is more likely to assist resolving academic challenges rather than lead to failure (Thomas, 2002), thus reducing the inclination to drop out, especially in their first year of study (Wilcox et al., 2005).

Furthermore, for successful transition the students' lived-experience needs to come to the foreground of research (Gale and Parker, 2014) and focus should be placed on making the most of their own perspective (Maunder et al., 2013). Such a project, conducted by Timmis et al. (2022), utilized a letter to self that undergraduates addressed to their younger selves offering advice and guidance on effective transition. This 'older & wiser self' letter was employed by the institution's pastoral care resources with connection sessions arranged between personal tutors and tutees and students' reflections gathered as feedback. Such a letter can provide an authentic road map on how to deal with obstacles in the process and has been deemed quite valuable for discussion and reflection purposes (tutor-tutee, student peer-peer) throughout the transition and especially at key moments e.g. initial weeks. In preparation phase, it is proposed that pre- arrival resources of this kind can serve to start the transition process earlier involving students more effectively. As was the case with the above-mentioned study, themes identified by students can be turned into digital resources for new students to delve into and familiarize themselves with prior to HE entry, which can take place much earlier than welcome week. Moreover, to help with the sense of belonging, students could be allocated a level 5/6 Welcome Buddy (Timmis et al, 2022) offering social and academic support with clear emotional advantages to freshmen. However, more research will be necessary to evaluate the impact of this intervention on retention.

Regarding Assessment criteria workshops, the obstacles (poor attendance and tutor variability) need to be countered for more

effective results. Specifically, first embedding them into subject teaching to make them relate to disciplinary core learning would most probably eliminate the problem of attendance. And if this is coupled with a workshop design run only by a small number of tutors being properly qualified and trained accordingly, ones who demonstrate a consistent approach on the workshops, then the intervention may well head for success. Arguably, the role of the teacher is central as the agent who designs the lessons, breaks down teaching into more manageable parts, offers constructive feedback, helps with goal setting, engages students in collaborative learning and generally manifest themselves as positive role models, people in authority who care and share by being knowledgeable and offering encouragement and support. This said, clearly there are challenges disrupting the process that can be either teacher based (lack of preparation, teaching style, teacher-centered beliefs) or socio-financial in nature (large classes, lack of resources, stereotypes).

On a final note, as both cognition and emotion are at play in transition with emotion affecting learning (Pekrun, 2011) *through motivation, attention, memory, and self-regulation*, it is highly recommended that a holistic approach inclusive of well-being through mindfulness practices (Galante et al., 2018; Wingert et al., 2020) is implemented for more visible results. It is of utmost importance that programme-planners keep an open mind and work with original and comprehensive strategies engaging the whole of the student rather than the part and addressing the forest rather than the tree.

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