Transition and the First Year Experience: University Students' Expectations

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ABSTRACT

Given the Higher Education Statistics Agency's (HESA, 2013) latest figures for the UK, which evidence a 6% decrease in student entry for the academic year 2012/13 compared with 2011/12, it appears timely to consider what students expect to gain from attending university. Such expectations potentially frame their first year experiences – positively or negatively – which, according to the literature, largely determine performance, with obvious implications for attrition (Upcraft et al. 2005). In the UK, research has positioned the first year experience as being critical for laying down the foundations of academic study and for developing skills in addressing student employability (Ali 2012). Furthermore, research undertaken for the Australian Learning and Teaching council suggests the first year experience needs to be viewed as 'transition pedagogy', involving an approach that scaffolds and mediates the first year learning experience, aiming to support student engagement, success and retention (Kift and Nelson 2005). This paper considers the qualitative findings from an online pre- and post- entry student survey during the academic year 2012/2013, one of the aims of which was to examine student expectations of what they hoped to gain from attending university in the UK. The methodology adopted an interpretivist stance with the use of constructivist grounded theory (adapted from the work of Charmaz 2006), in order to explore the

research question: 'What do you expect to gain from attending university?'

Keywords: first-year experience, identity, student motivation, transferable skills, transition

Introduction

During the mid-1990s, an evident paradigm shift for Higher Education (HE) in the UK became apparent, with a move from elite to mass HE. Such a shift created the notion of quality as a process underpinned by transformation, engaging students in transformational ways as agents of change, in contrast with the previous quality-as-accountability perspective (Harvey and Knight, 1996). Thus, the pre-entry process for HE in the UK is worthy of attention if, in that transition, institutions are to nurture student agency for improved engagement and to alleviate attrition.

The literature identifies a number of factors as to why students drop-out from university, however three broad categories can be identified: academic difficulties, inability to achieve goals and lack of academic and social engagement with the institution (Tinto 2013; see also Yorke and Longden 2008). To support engagement, during transition, a variety of innovative initiatives exist, with the aim of improving retention rates. For example, some universities offer pre-entry summer schools that can help to establish face-to-face relations (Thomas 2012). Moreover, research from Australia has shown that if universities act upon the knowledge, understanding and skills students arrive with when they enter university, such information can inform inclusive and progressive/continuous curriculum/pedagogical practices; a socio-constructivist approach for learning and teaching to facilitate students' mediations with their new environment, identified as a 'transition pedagogy' (Kift and Nelson 2005). Transition pedagogy centralises pedagogical approaches that are defined by learner/student need, for example establishing explicit first year foundations and opportunities for application of knowledge, including skills. Research undertaken with UK university engineering students suggests such skill development can be supported by a variety of teaching approaches, whether integrated, embedded or bolted-on (Chadha and Nicholls 2009). Similarly,

associated literature recommends that transition support needs to be a part of the established teaching activity at university, if the aim is to enhance students' skill-sets, then there is a need to build training into staff professional development, to ensure continuity and progression across the first year student experience (Whittaker 2008). Essentially, it is clear from the literature that students need to be supported in the development of a sense of purpose from the very beginning; during the pre-entry phase, across time spent at university and with regard to transition out (Lizzio and Wilson, 2010; Whittaker 2008).

Context, Participants and Methodology

The present study was undertaken within a medium-sized research-led and practice-driven university in Wales, that accommodates approximately 17,000 students. The methodology adopted for the research included a quasi-experimental design (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007) involving pre- and post-transition survey data collection for quantitative and qualitative analysis and evaluation. During September, two weeks before arriving at the university, all first year undergraduate entrants to programmes in Business and Economics were sent an email asking them to participate in the research, and completed a blend of online, Likert scale and written responses to a series of questions. The email contained the relevant URLs and login information required to complete the tasks. The survey was split into three sections: expectations of university, confidence with regard to perceptions of university life and self-assessments of their own academic skills. Moreover, students were sent a link for the University's online study-skills software, available for use in their own time and at their own pace. The rationale for the inclusion of promoting the software to students was to aid the development of academic and skill-based reflective activity.
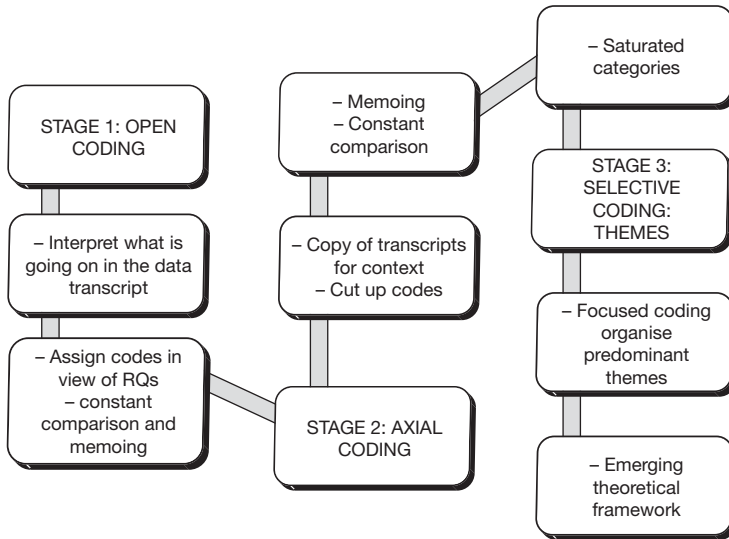
At the end of semester one, during the fourteenth week of term, the process was repeated with the same sample of students. From a total cohort of 353 students, 38 males and 40 females completed the first survey (N=78) with a mean age of 18.7. The total number of students who completed the second survey (N=88) included 38 males, 25 females and 25 students who did not declare their date of birth or female/male status. However, the mean age recorded across the group was 18.6. While this represents a relatively modest response rate, suggesting a need for subsequent confirmatory studies and extensions of methodology (for example, the

addition of social media correspondence), the data are nonetheless rich, containing fascinating, nuanced insights into student views and expectations. This paper focuses on the qualitative findings from the first question in the first section of the survey: 'What do you expect to gain from attending university?'

To reiterate, and in accordance with the British Educational Research Guidelines (2011), student consent was sought for the study in an initial email. Further ethical considerations included a face-to-face meeting between the cohort and a member of the research team, at the end of semester one, which afforded an opportunity for students to raise queries; thus a member–check opportunity was in place. All student data was coded anonymously in reference with student numbers and stored in Excel files that required password access.

The data were analysed with the use of a three-stage process of Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) (Figure 1), adapted from the work of Charmaz (2006). To confirm, an inductive-deductive approach was utilised. In the first instance an initial light-touch, read-through of associated literature was undertaken. Second, inductive open codes were applied to the raw data-transcripts. Constant comparison at this stage enabled an iterative approach and the duplication of open codes; recognisable patterns in the students' responses could be tracked, and at the same time new codes were identified. The deductive element involved constant comparison and memo activity both with the associated literature (informed by the initial read-through stage) and wider literature, in response to the inductive open-codes. Next, those open codes were mapped onto a canvas in view of the research question. Each code was placed into an emergent category, and the decision for best fit depended on inductive and deductive memo detail to assist constant comparison across the categories. During the stage of axial coding, the aim was to compare, and in turn consolidate categories, again in view of memo details. Saturated categories, those with a large cluster of codes, were then considered for selection to inform the eventual themes. The rationale for using this systematic method was acknowledgment of the researchers' co-construction of knowledge as a consequence of engagement with the data analysis process. In turn, this approach corresponded with the overarching interpretivist stance for the study (Crotty 1998). Two researchers analysed the data; triangulated with the literature to inform interpretations and ensure trustworthiness (Guba and Lincoln 1985). Such an iterative, inductive-deductive approach was considered as a best fit for the analysis in

Figure 1: Analysis framework: Constructivist grounded theory

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STAGE 1: OPEN          – Memoing              – Saturated
CODING                 – Constant              categories
                        comparison
                                               STAGE 3:
– Interpret what is    – Copy of transcripts   SELECTIVE
going on in the data     for context           CODING:
transcript             – Cut up codes          THEMES

– Assign codes in                              – Focused coding
view of RQs                                      organise
– constant             STAGE 2: AXIAL           predominant
comparison and         CODING                    themes
memoing
                                               – Emerging
                                                theoretical
                                                framework
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contrast with the Glaserian method, which does not include a preliminary read-through of the literature. Given our wish to work inductively with the data, we did not adopt the Straussian method due to a necessity for early selective coding to inform a deductive analysis. Rather, we sought an eventual selective process that drew on the inductive codes and memo activity.

Presentation of Findings

A total of 283 open codes were identified across the pre-survey data for the first stage of analysis. There were 10 categories initially, with some subsequently subsumed into others, dependent on connections during the process of constant comparison and associated memo details. Of those 10 categories, one remained an outlier: 'Quality', made up of a small number of codes that could not be connected elsewhere in the analysis. Following the process of consolidation, the remaining 6 categories for the pre-survey analysis included: personal development; social development; academic attainment; specific skills; employability; and motivation.

## Figure 2: Categories for the pre–survey analysis
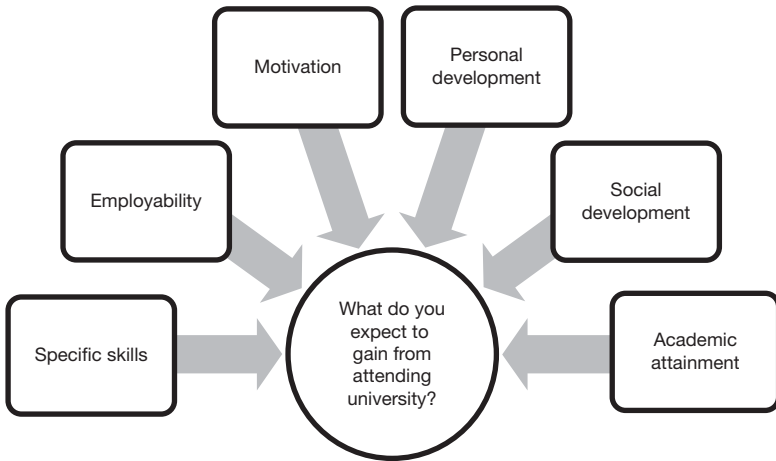
There were a total of 172 inductive open codes for the post–survey data. Next, a deductive approach was utilised, which included a process of constant comparison and memo activity that logged differences and similarities, in order to build on the identified pre–survey categories. It was apparent that at this sampling point, the clustered coding for the academic development category included more of a focus on achievement for employment compared with the pre–survey data. The motivation cluster remained stable, and the skills category differed in focus compared with the pre–data. The employability category included employability skills, career, social mobility and a wish to achieve financial gain in the future. Fewer codes existed for personal and social development, but those categories nevertheless remained saturated. The outlier included direct reference to 'Extra–curricular activity', such as playing sports, a small clustered category unconnected with constant comparison or memo activity.

The following table (Table 1) shows the relationships from the final merger of categories across the pre– and post–surveys that informed three eventual themes.

The next section draws on examples from the data to evidence the authentic student voice, in response to the research question: 'What do you expect to gain from attending university?' The themes: identity; motivated

Figure 3: Categories for the post–survey analysis
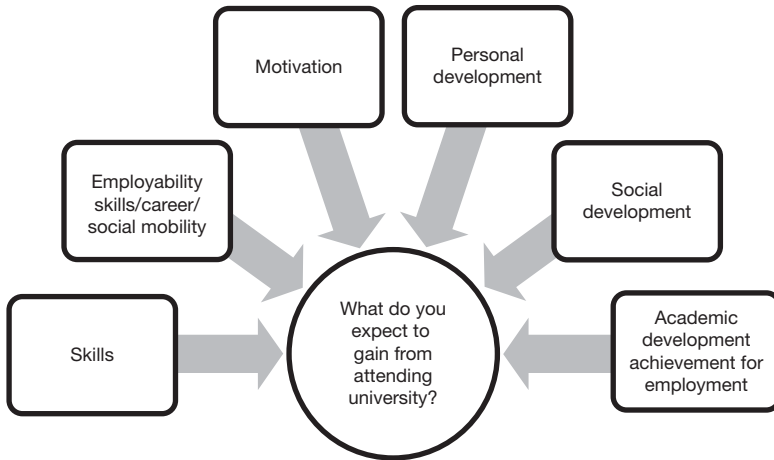
by specific outcomes; and transferable skills, are interpreted in relation to both associated and wider literature.

Identity

Students' responses were categorised into two strands for the theme Identity. The first strand related to personal development. Featured within the pre-and post-transition responses were intra–personal skills, maturity, and confidence to rise to challenges and to become independent. The data suggested students were seeking a new, unique life experience at university.

Table 1: Combined pre–and post–survey categories and eventual themes

Combined pre and post data categories	Theme
Personal and social development	Identity
Academic attainment and achievement for employability, career and social mobility	Motivated by specific outcomes
Skills and employability skills	Transferable skills

> I also want to identify myself, identify myself meaning to know my weaknesses and strengths.

> I expect to gain confidence as a person and become independent.

> I expect to learn to be able to live individually with more responsibility and more independence.

> I want to gain experience at what it is like to live away from my parents' influence and see what it will be like to live on my own. I hope to gain friends … and grow as a person.

> I hope to gain independence and to take on new challenges … An unforgettable experience that only university can provide.

The post-survey data showed personal development was closely linked with independence, life-skills and academic skills. It was noticeable that a key difference between the pre-and post-transition data included a stronger focus on academic development in the post-survey.

> I would like to gain a 1st degree, as well as developing a variety of skills along the way. I want to have an enjoyable experience which will prepare me for the 'realworld'.

> Academic skills and get a good degree.

> A degree … long term friends and academic skills.

> A good degree and independence – experience life skills.

> A 1st class degree … life experience.

The second strand – social development – showed students were hoping to develop social skills, and these features were present across both surveys. Students expected to gain a broader social and cultural awareness through meeting a diverse group of friends:

> I hope to enjoy the whole University experience such as attending lectures and meeting different people from around the world.

> I want to learn how to interact with people more.

> I hope to gain friends that share my interests and experiences that will help me to grow as a person … I hope to enhance my cultural and social horizon.

> Friendship and Social experiences.

> Life experience, a degree, new friends.

In view of the literature that suggests students should be engaged in trans-formational ways in order to enhance the student experience (Harvey and

Knight 1996), the inference is that such engagement needs to include consideration of a number of elements for student success. Whilst it can be suggested such elements often pivot around learning, what is also clear from the literature pertaining to transition, retention and attrition is a need for a holistic stance to underpin university provision. For example, personal and social development appear to be important issues in the literature, in that institutions can and should facilitate supportive pathways and opportunities for interaction so as to engender a sense of belonging (Kift and Nelson 2005). Certainly, this appears to make sense if student success is largely determined by experiences during the first year (Upcraft et al. 2005). In turn, it can be inferred that the notion of identity will often inform how students reflect 'on new activities, new worlds and new ways of being including personal, collective meanings and social relations' (Holland et al. 1998, p. 5). Therefore, a holistic stance for transition and the first year experience at university can be conceived as having two fundamental elements: the physical act of transition to higher education, and transition in identity.

Motivated by specific outcomes

Motivation is presented here as an intention to engage in order to achieve stipulated goals/outcomes. The pre-arrival survey data showed students' responses were focused on very specific academic attainment, which related to subject knowledge and even post-graduate study. In addition, employability featured as a strong category in this analysis:

> I expect to learn more about Economics, in a more detailed and specific way.

> A degree in Business Management, vital skills and improved knowledge and understanding.

> A 1st class honours degree leading to a Phd giving me good access to a job in research.

> I expect to gain qualifications that will provide me with a large stepping stone into employment. I expect to be more exposed to the possibilities and opportunities of the potential that an economics qualification can reach.

> A degree and masters to allow me to achieve to the highest of my ability.

The post-transition data revealed students' perceptions maintained motivation for academic attainment, but there was also a stronger emphasis with regard to links between specific achievements for employment.

Students' responses were motivated by future career prospects and social mobility:

> A high level degree, so I can then go on and do a Masters

> A first class honours degree, knowledge and experience for a productive career … I expect to gain … large network of associates – contacts made within industries.

> A degree which will help me get a well-paid job in the future …

> Obtain a highly recognised and quality degree which will allow me to continue on my path to a successful career.

> A degree to help me get a better job, Long term friends, Academic skills.

According to the literature, a sense of commitment and motivation equates to student engagement (Mayes 2009). Yet when students realise the first year does not count towards their degree, then commitment and motivation can shift in focus: to getting through assessment, and for some to just pass. This is indeed a paradox for first-year students, in which the first year of transition is supposed to be the platform for the development of learning how to learn; strategies that can enable the student to draw on intrinsic motivation, and develop a repertoire of study skills to enhance success across both their remaining years at university and thereafter in the world of work. As such, a consequence of this paradox is 'that many do not become properly equipped (either in skills or strategies) to act subsequently as autonomous and independently motivated learners' (Mayes 2009, p. 3). What is interesting, however, is that the students' responses concur with theoretical propositions to support the first-year experience, such as the 'student lifecycle model', which includes a number of features for student success across transition in and out of university, and one notable feature for success is the need for students to recognise a vocational direction to underpin a sense of purpose (Lizzio and Wilson 2010).

Transferable skills

A range of different skills were noted in both the pre-and post-transition data, with the former showing reference to specific skills: soft skills, thinking skills and specialist skills. In reference to soft skills, students stated their wish to develop communication skills, to work as a team, and to develop time management and organisational skills. Students also referred to an identified need to develop thinking skills, for example critical/creative thinking and problem solving. Specialist skills included reference to

subject-specific skills such as, business, accounting, finance, leadership and management skills.

> I hope for growth in: knowledge in the field, understanding how to communicate and work with a variety of different people, for me to be more organised and manage myself efficiently.

> A degree in Business Management, from which I can gain a number of vital skills and improved knowledge and understanding.

> A 2:1 or a 1st, a broader understanding of the economic world, I also hope to gain better skills such as time management and time allocation.

> Gain new skills such as communication, research and analysis, personal development and also critical and creative thinking.

> Business skills, maturity, money management.

The post-data presented a continued focus on soft skills, including communication skills, time management and organisational skills. For the second survey point there was a shift in the data whereby students' responses referred to generic skill development, which revealed the responses were not so specific compared to those of the pre-data. There was also a shift in the employability category, in that the codes were much more related to skills.

> The skills to communicate/get along with different people ... to gain better skills such as time management.

> A degree – skills – A good career – Well-paid job – a good lifestyle.

> A degree and a wide range of skills to make me employable.

> I hope to gain the skills that are required to obtain a job within an area of study that interests me.

> I also expect to gain a large number of skills which will make me more employable.

Referring back to the literature, it has been a long standing mission of universities in the UK to address the development of their students' skill-sets, prompted by one of the largest reviews of higher education, which highlighted communication skills and learning how to learn (metalearning),[1]

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[1] See Meyer et al. 2009 for an example linking this to threshold concepts in one of the disciplines under consideration here

among other recommendations, as being the key to future success of grad-uates whatever they intended to do later in life (Dearing 1997).

Whilst it is interesting that students recognise the need for developing transferable skills, research suggests that teaching the development of transferable skills at university can involve three possible approaches – integrated, embedded and bolt-on – to help build student awareness of transferable skills education (Chadha and Nicholls 2006). One consideration for universities might be in terms of fitness for purpose with regard to pedagogy and the skill-sets students arrive with. Indeed, the data here show students are more than willing to share their starting points.

Table 2 Kift's (2009) model for transition:
Six organising principles

Organising Principle	Action
Transition	Curriculum and delivery needs to be designed to assist transition from previous educational experiences to the nature of learning in HE and learning in their discipline as part of their lifelong learning to mediate and support transition over time
Diversity	Inclusive and accessible curriculum, informed by knowledge of what the students bring in terms of backgrounds, needs, experiences, patterns of study, and accommodate for the development of a broad range of skills and knowledge
Design	First year curriculum design and delivery should be student-focused, explicit and relevant in providing the foundation and scaffolding necessary for first year learning success
Engagement	Learning, teaching, and assessment approaches in the first year curriculum should enact an engaging and involving curriculum pedagogy and should enable active and collaborative learning. Learning communities should be promoted ... and provide for peer-to-peer collaboration and teacher-student interaction
Assessment	Students should receive regular, formative evaluations of their work early in their programme of study to aid their learning and to provide feedback to both students and staff on student progress and achievement
Evaluation and Monitoring	Curriculum design is evidence-based and enhanced by regular evaluation that leads to curriculum development and renewal designed to improve student learning. The first year curriculum should also have strategies embedded to monitor all students' engagement in their learning and to identify and intervene in a timely way with students at risk of not succeeding or fully achieving desired learning outcomes

Conclusions

This paper has discussed student responses to the research question: 'What do you expect to gain from attending university?' The students' responses concur with related literature for best practice in three ways. First, it appears they are seeking engagement that enables them to overcome academic difficulties, as outlined in their identified skill-sets upon arrival to university, and in their wish to develop transferable skills. Second, the goal-directed responses appeared to revolve around employability, ensuring a sense of purpose (Lizzio and Wilson 2010). Third, the findings indicate students are aware of the necessity to develop a personal, social and academic engagement with the institution (Tinto 2013). However, due to the timing of this research study, which focused on the first semester, it is suggested students may not have included negative views for question 1 of the survey. Combined with the use of an opportunity sample and the fact that the methodology was, in a sense, a pilot approach, it would bode well for future studies to track students across their first year to get a broader view. Further work could also include a focus on the implications for transition to the second year, certainly in terms of the potential correlations between student motivation and the absence of first year attainment in final awards. Notably, the literature suggests a dedicated focus on curriculum alignment with the individual student's holistic progression for a personalised learning approach, to support a 'mastery for success' (Collier and Morgan 2008; Kift et al. 2010). Therefore, in conclusion movement forward might involve a focus on specific organising principles that enable a supportive environment for successful transition (Kift 2009) (Table 2).

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