

Ideas, concerns and expectations – a “whole of institution” approach to navigating transitions and mapping the student journey

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Abstract

This paper examines preliminary findings from a research project designed to employ a “whole of institution” (Kift, 2015) approach to mapping the student journey at the University of Bolton, UK. The institution is diverse: a significant proportion of students are mature, first-generation, part-time, from state schools and colleges and from low socio-economic backgrounds (NS-SEC 4-7). The journey mapping project applies the ICE Model (ideas, concerns, expectations) to understand the factors (perceived and real) that affect engagement and transition to university. The data is being used to design student experience interventions to facilitate adjustment to university and to inform an early intervention and transitional support model. Participants’ responses from questionnaires, focus groups and semi-structured interviews are analysed to determine perceptions of their adjustment to university, their expectations and their experience. The following discussion addresses how the data informs the application of transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009) in our own context.

Introduction

Student engagement and retention are a priority for academic institutions, both within the UK and internationally. Engagement initiatives such as Peer Assisted Study Support (PASS) and Peer Mentoring have improved the academic and social integration of students during their time at university and there have been several developments in pedagogy to understand the role of students as partners. In 2005 transition pedagogy emerged as “a guiding philosophy for intentional first year curriculum design and support that carefully scaffolds and mediates the first year learning experience for contemporary heterogeneous cohorts” (Kift, 2009, p. 4). Recently, Kift (2015) advocated a “whole of institution” approach to first year transitions where all stakeholders are involved in embedding a culture of First Year Experience (FYE) and “getting the context right for staff [helps] to get the context right for students” (Hunt, 2009, p. 14). This paper examines preliminary findings from a research project designed to adopt such an approach to student transition and engagement by mapping the student journey at the University of Bolton, UK. The project is part of an umbrella project which involves designing and implementing a series of student experience interventions to facilitate transition and engagement. The journey mapping project will inform the development of an early intervention and transitional support model, providing support to students as they adjust to university.

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The research context

A “whole of institution” approach to addressing student transition and engagement

Recent scholarship has focussed on what can be done to aid students’ adjustment to university and help them navigate different transition periods (Tinto, 1993; Taylor et al 2007 & Morgan, 2012). Scholarship on student retention has led to a more “sophisticated understanding of the complex web of events that shape student leaving and persistence” (Tinto, 2006-7, p.1-2). In Australia, transition pedagogy (Kift, 2005 & 2009) investigates the scaffolding process for student success framed around six principles of first year curriculum design: (1) transition, (2) diversity, (3) design, (4) engagement, (5) assessment and (6) evaluation and monitoring. In the UK, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have developed Student Engagement and Student Experience Strategies focussing on student-centred pedagogies. The introduction of £9,000 university fees has prompted significant investment in the student experience and policymaking has focussed on wider participation in higher education by those from low socio-economic backgrounds. HEIs have been building capacity to improve the student journey and overall satisfaction. More recently, however, national and international scholarship on pedagogy has been focussing on the First Year Experience (FYE) as the key to helping students transition.

Research suggests that it takes an average 12 weeks for a student to settle into university and a full 12 months for most students to transition into independent learners (Scott, 2006; Yorke & Longden, 2008; Kift, 2009; James et al, 2010). In the UK scholarship has been developed around the Student Experience Practitioner (SEP) and Student Lifecycle models. Both are designed to understand the student lifecycle, define roles and responsibilities and enhance the partnerships between institutions, students and staff. The SEP Model recognises the need for all staff at all levels to develop and implement initiatives to improve the student experience (Morgan, 2012). The model addresses issues around the “massification (increase in student numbers) and diversification of the student body (participation by different group identities)” where diversification poses the biggest challenge for higher education practitioners (Morgan, 2013, p.10). In “What Works?” (Thomas, 2012, p. 15) it was reported that, in the UK, up to 42% of students consider leaving higher education, with 8% of students withdrawing fully from university. Students are most likely to leave in the first semester of their first year, or just after Christmas. The Report also outlined that “the academic sphere is the most important site for nurturing participation of the type which engenders a sense of belonging”. It has been identified that success and academic performance in the first year is a primary indicator of students persisting with their studies through to graduation. Similarly, grit has been identified as a significant predicting factor of academic performance (Chang, 2014) and according to Duckworth (2013) “grit” is the better indicator of graduate marks.

New developments in pedagogy have been accompanied by the development of theoretical frameworks which have emerged to articulate the complexities around student transition and identity. In the USA student development theory examines the way a student grows, progresses or increases his/her developmental capabilities. Many frameworks focus on

psychosocial factors which examine the nature of a student's development, the important issues that they face and their identities, particularly around how they define themselves. Chickering's Theory of Identity Development (1993), for example, has been effective in helping to map the progress students make, moving through seven identified vectors at varying rates and different orders, acknowledging the importance of identities, personal relationships and emotions in the transition to interdependence. In the UK, HEIs are becoming much more aware of the differing identities and experiences of heterogeneous student communities. Trends are reflecting a move to a more regionalised, non-residential model of student life where university study is only one part of a very complex set of identities. Students have "multiple life roles" balancing their studies with "being carers or parents; needing to undertake...paid work; or having to commute distances to university" (Morgan, 2013, p 11). Students who attend UK HEIs with different reputations (for example, elite Russell Group institutions versus post-1992 "new" universities) are often aware of the class differences or "status" between themselves. Although more students from different backgrounds are entering higher education, there remains a gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged. It is clear that students' conceptions of their identity is also defined by their social class, their level of social and cultural capital and what Bourdieu termed "habitus" (Savage, 2015).

Despite clear changes to the demographic of students who embark upon university study, "it is the case...that undergraduate students do persist and are able to complete their program of study in the face of what may seem insurmountable objective challenges" (Whannell & Whannell, 2015, p. 2). Models have moved away from looking at cohort identities and towards looking at students as individuals, with an increasingly personalised student experience. Whannell & Whannell's theoretical framework, based on identity theory, looks at an individual's social and self-identity, considering the student's emotional commitment, their University Student Identity and their University Student Role. The increasing trend for assessing different (and often competing) student identities has tacitly acknowledged that a more traditional, centralised model of the student experience, one which assumes that most students are 18-21, living residentially and principally engaged in their primary identity of "student" is unlikely to work in most HEI contexts. Whilst the reasons for leaving university are diverse and complex, the most common factors centre upon the "interrelationship between course dissatisfaction, course preference, limited engagement, and student perceptions of academic staff and of the quality of teaching" (Krause et al, 2005, p. 4).

The Bolton context

At the University of Bolton the new 2020 Teaching Intensive, Research Informed (TIRI) Strategic Agenda has prompted significant investment in the student experience. The TIRI strategic plan is supported by the Student Experience (SE) Strategy (2015). The SE Strategy acknowledges three important dimensions to the student experience: academic, social and administrative. It focuses on the importance of peer learning and personal tutoring in early assessment and early intervention to provide consistent, targeted support for those students deemed to be "at increased risk" of attrition or low academic attainment. We have an

extremely diverse student population: approximately 11,000 students of which 55% are mature, 35% part-time, 30% members of an ethnic minority and 12% students with disabilities. NUS research commissioned by Bolton Students' Union in 2014 found that our students fall into four groups depending on how they identify with the institution and with their friends and family: only 9% live residentially. We occupy a unique position within the sector, one where our student profiles differ quite substantially from other institutions. Many of our students come to the University with a wide range of pre-entry qualifications and "marginalised learner identities" (Reay et al, 2002): they have competing demands on their time, often balancing family, caring and/or work commitments in addition to their studies. Understanding student engagement in this context is therefore challenging and complex.

Methodology

Data collection, analysis and sampling

The Bolton student journey mapping project employed a mixed-methods approach to data collection and analysis. Students at different levels of study were asked to participate in questionnaires, focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The project collected participants' demographic data and focussed on psychosocial factors to yield both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data was captured to assess at what stage in the first year students were most concerned with, for example, assessments, connecting with other students, course choice, career options, and finance. Qualitative questions explored levels of student engagement with tutors, clubs and societies as well as whether or not the student had considered leaving. Respondents also identified their main sources of support.

A large-scale focus group was undertaken in the Bolton Business School with 24 first year undergraduate students registered on a skills module. Each student was asked to fill out a questionnaire individually before forming four small focus groups of between 6-8 participants. The students were given four questions to consider, based on the ICE Model (1) ideas (2) concerns and (3) expectations which has been used in the National Health Service (NHS) to understand patient relationships and manage expectations (Becker & Maiman, 1975). ICE was applied in a new context to understand its impact on collecting student journey data and to help build rapport with students as stakeholders in the process of shaping their individual and collective experience. Participants were asked to consider these three factors at four time points in their student journey: (1) before they arrived at Bolton, (2) upon arrival and in the first two weeks, (3) the stage that they were at currently (week 10, semester 1) and (4) looking forward to the next 10 months to the end of the academic year. Finally, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of students who filled out the questionnaires. The questionnaires were used to provide a loose structure for the interviews, where participants were asked to explore further some of their responses to the quantitative and qualitative questions. The interviews were conducted with a cross-section of participants including recent graduate interns, undergraduates and postgraduates to provide an insight into different student journeys. A relatively small sample size was adopted in the first instance. Crouch & McKenzie (2006) discuss the logic of small sample sizes and cite Drehler (1994, p. 286) as a proponent of naturalistic settings and small samples which permit repeated contacts with respondents which enhance validity and reliability. The data was transcribed, coded and a thematic content analysis was conducted based on models advocated by Braun & Clarke (2006) and Bryman (2008). For qualitative data, key ideas and words were systematically highlighted, text was then grouped and coded and the codes were later refined. Further

analysis consisted of exploring and analysing the relationship and patterns between codes before grouping data into themes and sub-themes. Deeper analysis involved interpreting qualitative data and comparing it with the quantitative data to produce the results.

Findings and analysis

Of the 47 respondents, 49% were male and 51% female. 57% were between the ages of 18-21, 27% between the ages of 22-35 and 13% over 35. 98% studied full time. 83% lived off-campus (with parents or in private accommodation). 53% were working, with most (64%) working under 20 hours a week. 85% had no dependents. Only 15% of respondents considered leaving university, and cited very specific reasons for doing so e.g. issues with their course. When asked what they would have changed about their first year 28% cited that they desired to develop better learning strategies, 19% wished to be more prepared and 12.7% wished that they had joined a society. 15% were happy with their first year and would not change anything. When asked about their main source of support, 53% cited tutors, 32% mentioned support from peers/friends and 42.5% received support from family. Only 8.5% received support from course-mates. 21% cited Moodle (the Virtual Learning Environment) and central services such as the Library as a significant source of support. 53% indicated that they had more than one source of support (e.g. tutors as well as friends and family). Figure 1 represents the time of year when students expressed worries or concerns about particular issues such as course choice.

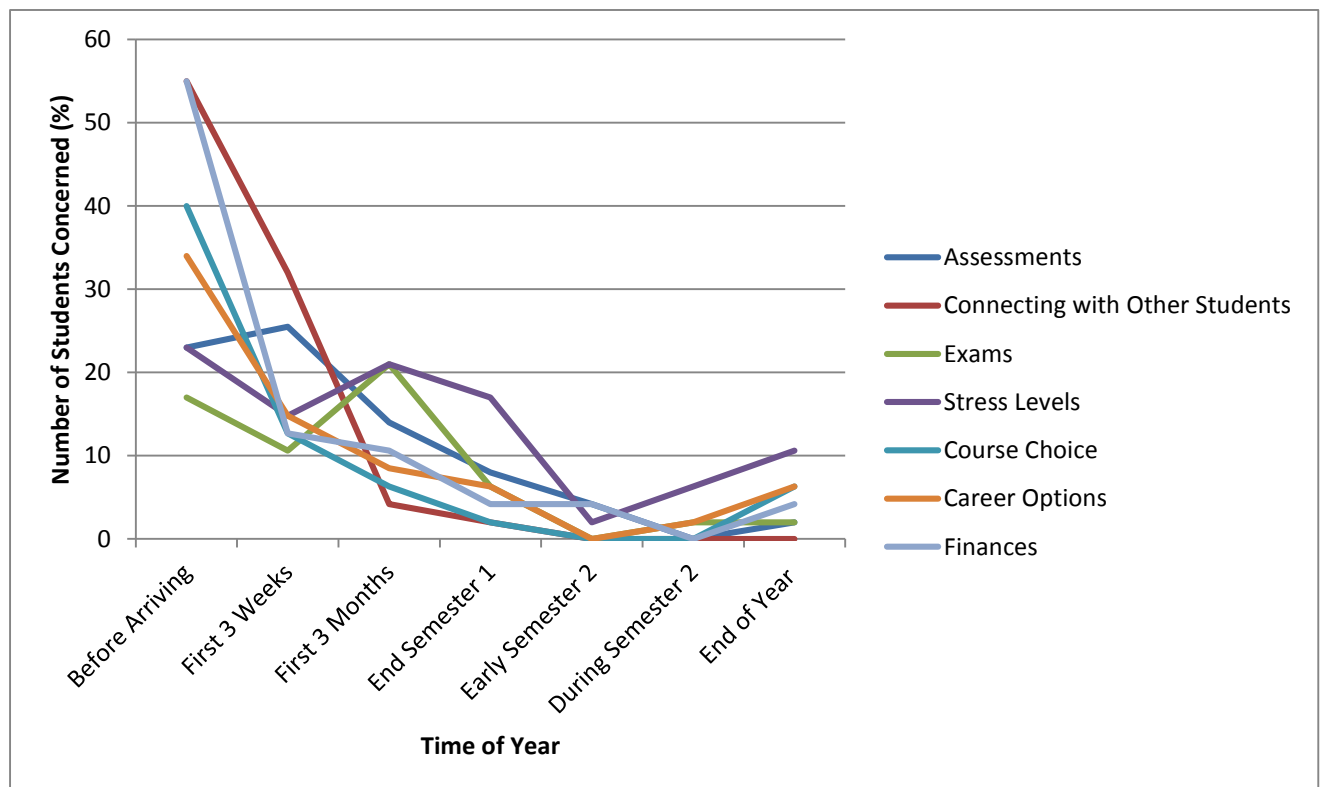


Figure 1: The time of year when students had particular concerns

Student transition into higher education

Figure 2 demonstrates the themes and sub-themes emerging from a thematic content analysis of focus group and semi-structured interview data. The biggest concern for students

participating in the project was transitioning into the role of a university student. 55% were concerned about connecting with other students, 40% worried about their course choice and 34% were worried about their career path. In the focus groups the ICE model helped to clarify the differences between students' perceived and actual experience. Respondents identified that, before arrival, they expected to adjust to independent study and would receive less tutor support. Students reported that university would be "harder" than further education, but that it would increasingly become harder as they entered the second and the third year. This perception was also present on arrival and at week 10, where 21% of students reported that anxiety and stress over the first exams and assessments intensified towards the end of the first semester and at the beginning of the second. This was due, in part, to their expectation that university study would be more demanding but also due to different assessment methods. 23% were anxious about assessments before arrival and this increased to 40% by the end of the first few months. 30% were cited that they were most concerned with assessments at the moment. Despite this, 68% and 44% respectively responded that mental and physical health were not a concern for them and 36% were not concerned about their own wellbeing. Several focus group students reported additional difficulties that affected their actual experience of university-level study: familiarising themselves with new "terminologies", subject areas and disciplines, acquiring new skills, learning to give presentations and managing a demanding workload. There was also a perceived difference between different types of modules, students cited law and economics as markedly harder and more difficult than business, impacting on their expectations about grades and feedback. 28% commented that the acquisition of learning strategies was the one thing that they wished they had done differently, 19% wished they had been more prepared for study. In the focus groups and interviews participants were particularly concerned about time management, referencing and academic writing, highlighting difficulties in managing their workload alongside other commitments, as well as the desire to do well and "make a good first impression". One graduate commented that the first year should be seen as "the year you can make mistakes" rather than the "year that doesn't count". Students should be encouraged to embrace their transitional development, to make mistakes and develop skills.



Figure 2: Themes and sub-themes emerging from a thematic content analysis

Working and studying

89% of respondents identified, primarily, as students, and 10.6% acknowledged their competing and often conflicting identities as parents and workers, even mature learners. This had clear implications for the overall student experience where “marginalised learner identities” impacted significantly on transition to university. Some students who worked acknowledged the benefits that it brought in terms of alleviating financial concerns and gaining hands-on work experience, as well as other skills. One respondent felt that working helped him to focus better on his studies, providing an outlet for stress and anxiety and helping him to develop study strategies. Other respondents felt that working impacted negatively on their transition to university: one commented that work was stressful to manage and he felt “more like a stranger or a visitor than a student”, missing out on important interactions with other students and lecturers. There was also a marked difference between the perceived and actual experience of the 10.6% of students who identified as residential (living in Halls) and those who were non-residential (83%). Those who were residential reported that they expected the university to be a lot larger than it was, with Welcome Week focussed around a “lot of heavy drinking”. One residential student from London reflected upon her arrival at Bolton; she had visited friends at other universities and thought that university would be big with a large campus, that “there would be a sense of community where everyone would know each other”. A few non-residential students reported missing out on Welcome Week because they assumed that it was for 18-21 year old residential students who liked to drink and party. One mature learner said that she “didn’t feel like a real student”. Many expressed expectations about university infrastructure and how it might affect their time management and actual transition into university. Non-residential, commuting students like to work on campus from 9-5pm and library and technological infrastructure was central for them in providing support for this. The students valued fit-for-purpose learning spaces, ready access to computers and fast internet connections. Both residential and non-residential students commented on difficulties with juggling workload: they valued time between semesters or assignments to “recuperate and switch off” which had a positive effect on their physical and mental wellbeing. Graduate student interviews revealed that the trajectory of development during a university degree, coupled with a lack of time for relaxation, translated into increased levels of stress and pressure.

Tutor support

53% of questionnaire respondents reported that tutor support was essential in managing transition; all 13 interview participants cited tutor support as essential. 60% identified with their programme of study rather than with the institution which was likely linked to tutor and peer support. Students acknowledged that tutors offered “support” and “encouragement” as well as “advice & guidance”, helping to normalise anxieties around “adapting” to university life. In focus groups students acknowledged support from tutors citing their help in clarifying what was required and knowing how to apply this newly acquired knowledge to their next module, particularly to see an improvement in grades. Tutor support also related to the acquisition of university learning and study strategies. One student commented that her tutor “understood you as a student, you know she has been through it too”. The participants acknowledged the “teaching intensive” nature of the Bolton experience, commenting that they did not expect to get as much support from tutors and additional contact time. It was clear that tutors played a significant role in setting and managing expectations upon arrival, particularly around attendance, handing in assignments and participating in lectures. This impacted positively on respondents’ ideas and beliefs: “now we believe that we are highly

motivated” and “we show good commitment”. Tutors developed rapport with students, learning their names and taking an interest in students’ progress outside of their set modules: “there to ensure that [students] had the best experience possible”. Many also offered careers advice and tips on learning and coping strategies, encouraging students to relax and to acquire work experience. Tutors played a pivotal role in helping students articulate the value of a Bolton degree – one student compared her experience to that of her friend studying the same course at a different university. At interview, the tutor “seemed genuinely interested in her work” and, after arrival, she was “encouraged to work on what she found interesting”. In comparison, her friend “failed her first year after going out all the time and she had little contact with tutors”.

Peer support and connections

32% acknowledged the importance of peer support when adjusting to university, promoting positive mental health and wellbeing and avoiding isolation. Many expressed concerns about “fitting in” and worried about “cliques” of local students who had developed friendships whilst at college. Although peer relationships were important, and connecting with other students the most significant concern before arrival (56%), only 18% joined a society during their time at university. 34% indicated that if they were to join a society they would most likely do so within the first few weeks and months of arrival. 53% of respondents said they were not at all inclined to join a society with most (30%) citing lack of time as the most significant barrier to participation, alongside lack of information (19%) and/or limited choice/interest (19%). Despite this, qualitative responses indicated students were able to make friends comfortably, identifying primarily with their course mates. In the interviews there were several instances of students comparing their experience and progress to others’. This often resulted in increased anxiety about their peers adjusting to university quickly and more easily than them. This was particularly focussed around academic achievement: one student received a 2:1 mark (average attainment in assessments of 60-70%) whilst experiencing serious domestic problems: “we are not Oxford or Cambridge but a place where students can shine”. Where peer networks existed, these were often informal, coincidental and focussed around learning strategies. Students commented that peer-led academic support offered helped with developing confidence and “discussing their understanding of assignment(s) [which would] highlight any differing interpretations so that they could check this with lecturers”. Many graduate respondents highlighted that peer relationships were integral to remaining at university and not joining a society was something that they regretted. Those who did join a society felt that it had positive benefits for social integration, physical and mental wellbeing and meeting students both on and outside of their course.

Discussion: informing the student experience

A model of early intervention and transitional support

The above findings demonstrate students’ perceived and actual adjustment to university. These have informed an early intervention and transitional support model to address transition and engagement at Bolton, based on a “whole of institution” approach and applying the six principles of transition pedagogy. The project demonstrated that our students, both residential and non-residential, identify primarily with their programme of study, their peers and their tutors. The model therefore focusses on the integration of both residential and non-residential students, embedding the development of learning and social communities in each discipline. Student experience interventions are being designed and delivered in each school,

coordinated centrally, to work more effectively. The ICE framework is being embedded into first year curriculum design to manage perceived and real expectations of life at university, as well as to identify those students “at risk” of attrition or low attainment. The model facilitates a structured conversation around transition, helping to normalise anxieties around common transition points such as exams and assessments. It offers a forum for informal feedback on the first few weeks of their experience, helping tutors to articulate points in the student lifecycle where students typically experience difficulties and identifying issues which can be fed back into operational planning and course design. The diversity of our student body means that adopting Whannell & Whannell’s model of student identity is integral to facilitating group cohesion, through an appreciation of students as individuals.

Peer support

The early intervention model promotes peer engagement, particularly opportunities to join clubs and societies. Students in higher years, as well as trainee teachers, now provide informal support for first year students who are comfortable talking to graduates because they are “not threatened”. A more formalised, accredited, school-based peer mentoring programme has been designed and pilot Peer Assisted Study Support (PASS) groups have been developed to help students identify with their peers, promote better study planning, acquire learning and coping strategies and develop study skills. A Bolton Partnership is being created, in consultation with staff and students, to emphasise the roles, responsibilities and expectations of all stakeholders in the institution. Although 53% of respondents indicated that joining a club and society was not important to them, it was clear that lack of information and interest were significant in informing their perception. Academic societies are being created in different subject areas to promote the development of peer learning communities and better quality information on student engagement activities is being sent to students before arrival and promoted in the first few weeks of semester 1.

Tutor support

Tutors are clearly integral to student adjustment and play an important role in supporting peer relationships and articulating different transition points, especially around academic expectations, assessments and learning strategies. The personal tutoring offer at Bolton is being reviewed and aligned with the 6 principles of transition pedagogy. 32 Enhanced Personal Tutors (EPTs) have been appointed and trained from across the 8 academic schools to provide better coordinated and integrated support for foundation and first year students. EPTs play a key part in embedding the ICE model into the curriculum, and provide leadership in personal tutoring approaches, ensuring that regular conversations are happening around transition and adjustment. The EPTs will also champion the new Learning Development Framework which traces the trajectory of development of students in all year groups, supported by face-to-face and online professional development opportunities. EPTs therefore articulate student expectations, making improvements to the learning environment.

Conclusion

The variety of student experience interventions, cited above, promote a smoother transition to university, enhanced peer learning opportunities and more coordinated tutor support at Bolton. These are helping to inform the curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular engagement agenda. A more integrated and thoughtful approach to transition, based on the above, is being evaluated and the longitudinal impact of initiatives is being assessed. It is

expected that this multi-faceted approach will result in improved retention rates, increased attainment and more meaningful engagement between students and staff at the university.

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