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## Students' Perceptions on the Transition from Further Education in Schools to Higher Education

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### Abstract

*This article examines the perceptions of first year undergraduates concerning the transition from further to higher education study. The findings suggest that most students are anxious about independent learning when they embark on university study but that being taught in large lecture theatres does not cause concern. Furthermore, most students felt that the skills they had acquired in further education did equip them for this role at university. The article concludes by offering a number of recommendations as to how the transition from further to higher education can be eased. The importance of such findings and recommendations is relevant when evidence suggests that those who successfully complete higher education qualifications are "more likely to be in work and less likely to be unemployed than those qualified at lower levels" (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2009: 26).*

### Key Words

Higher education, transition, independent learning,

### Introduction

Prior to embarking upon the analysis contained in this article, it is perhaps necessary to give a brief account of the education system in England and Wales. The Education system in England and Wales is divided into four main stages:

- Primary education (5 – 11 years)
- Secondary education (11 – 16 years)
- Further education (16 – 19 years)
- Higher education (18 years onwards).

(Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), 2006)

The first two phases presented above (primary and secondary) are compulsory (QCA, 2006). Therefore children are legally obliged to remain in education until they are sixteen years of age. On completion of secondary education, most students (although there is no legal obligation) are examined in the National Curriculum subjects during GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) examinations (Chitty, 1999). Following these examinations, students can choose to enter the third, non-compulsory phase of education termed 'Further Education' and, during this phase, they can study AS (Advanced Subsidiary) and A (Advanced) levels. Further education can take place in sixth forms of schools or in colleges of further education.

Following this, students can then choose (subject to achieving necessary qualifications) to complete the final phase of education, higher education or university study. The National Audit Office (2007: 4) in their publication regarding student retention, point out that “higher education courses are programmes leading to qualifications, for credits which can be counted towards qualifications, which are above the standard of A levels or equivalent qualifications”.

It is the transition from further to higher education which is the main focus of this article. There are, of course, many avenues by which students can progress to higher education but this article confines itself to the transition from school to university. In this study, further education refers to the sixteen to nineteen year old (in schools) and higher education to university. It should be noted that social factors also have an impact on the transition but to delve into these is beyond the scope of this article.

In 1997, 921,000 students in total entered higher education. By 2009, however, this figure had increased to over 1.1 million (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2009). Bates, Pollard, Usher et al (2009) state that there has been an increase in students from ethnic minority groups, individuals with disabilities, women and mature students. Tait & Godfrey (2001) suggest that the student population is changing rapidly with students from different academic backgrounds embarking on higher education study. Government ministers are emphasising the need to maintain this growth and demand. Bates, Pollard, Usher et al (2009:5) state, “Increasing participation in HE (higher education) is a key policy drive for the government and forms part of the ambition of the UK to become a ‘world class leader in skills’ by the year 2020”. The National Audit Office (2007:6) indicate that “over their working life graduates earn, on average, over £100,000 more (in today’s terms) than similar non-graduates with A levels.” However, despite this demand for higher education growing, the actual participation rate in the UK is still below other developed countries (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2009). It is stated that, since 1998, the UK participation rate in HE has decreased from seventh to fifteenth for those universities in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2009). This article proffers that “there should be more bridges between further and higher education” (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2009:4).

Ertl, Hayward, Wright, et al (2008), having reviewed the literature, suggest that most students manage the transition from further to higher education successfully but that there is a significant proportion for whom the reality of university does not match pre-conceived ideas. Birnie (1999) has illustrated that there is often a wide divide between students’ experiences of A levels in schools and their degree expectations. This is supported by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2009) article where it is pointed out that not all students or members of the public understand the broad differences between school and university study, particularly the workload and independent learning elements. Furthermore, the article progresses to explain that students need to “be supported to become independent learners in higher education” (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2009: 75). Yorke and Longden (2008:2) draw a link between students’ experiences in the first year of university with retention rates. They found that the main reasons for students withdrawing from university were due to, “poor choice of programme; lack of personal commitment to

study; teaching quality; lack of contact with academic staff; inadequate academic progress; and finance”( Yorke and Longden, (2008:2). Whilst writing at an earlier date about student retention, Yorke (1999) stated that the following were key factors in causing students to leave university:

- Poor quality of student experience
- Inability to cope with the demands of the course
- Unhappiness with the social environment
- Wrong choice of programme
- Matters related to financial need
- Dissatisfaction with aspects of the course and student support structures

Furthermore, Ertl, Hayward, Wright, et al (2008) point out that the majority of student withdrawals occur in the first year of study. Whilst considering figures of withdrawal, The National Audit Office (2007) indicate that of the 256,000 full time, first degree students starting higher education in England in 2004/05, 91.6% continued into their second year. It is also suggested that retention of full time, first degree students has improved slightly since 1999/2000. As far as retention comparisons are concerned, the United Kingdom had the fifth highest estimated graduation rates in 2004, behind Japan, Ireland, Korea and Greece (National Audit Office, 2007). The move from further education to higher education is an enormous step. It has been observed that it exposes students to a new vista and by reason of the student being engaged in a new system of roles and relationships (Sappa & Bonica, 2008).

Ballinger (2002) in her study about the transition from A level English to degree study of the same subject asserts that the feeling of being “disorientated and disorganised” was reported frequently. Furthermore, Ballinger (2002) observes that students often have difficulties in devising their own timetables and meeting deadlines. Perhaps these difficulties are compounded by the fact that undergraduates have less contact time with staff compared to further education students (Marland, 2003). Ballinger (2002) concludes that the undergraduate timetable can often seem very sparse compared to school or college timetables. The author advances the proposition that the lack of formal contact time can also cause anxieties, combined with worry about teaching in large groups. Smith (2002) develops this by suggesting that it would take a vast amount of courage to stop and question a lecturer in front of large numbers of other students. Winterson and Russ (2009) explain that students have to become familiar with different learning styles, note-taking and referencing techniques. They drew the conclusion that “universities and schools should have a closer relationship in order to facilitate mutual planning for transition” (Winterson and Russ (2008: 341). This view was reiterated in 2006 when considering the teaching of biology at degree level it was advocated that there should be networks of teachers, students and university research departments and links between schools and universities (European Molecular Biology Organisation, 2006). Such a suggestion was also made back in 1990 by Clark and Ramsay but in 2003 Lowe and Cook suggested that this had not been adequately addressed (Lowe and Cook, 2003).

In essence therefore, the transition from further education to higher education is an enormous one which has to be adequately addressed to ensure that students reap the maximum benefit from university life in general and their chosen course in particular.

### **Research Study**

The key focus of this study was to identify students' perceptions about the transition from further education to higher education. In order to obtain as many responses as possible, a quantitative approach was utilised. Therefore, questionnaires, consisting of both closed and open questions, were used to gather data from one hundred first year students on a variety of different undergraduate courses. These students were chosen by using a random sampling frame. Out of the 100 questionnaires administered, eighty-three were returned. The questionnaire was drawn up by focussing and expanding upon pertinent issues raised in relevant studies.

Considering research ethics, as well as being informed that their participation was voluntary and that they were able to withdraw at any stage from the study, participants were also ensured confidentiality in that no information could lead to the identification of any individual. These procedures were in keeping with the ethical procedures of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2004).

Prior to conducting the main study, a pilot investigation took place. Bell (1993) suggests that, ideally, a group similar to the one that will form the population of the study should check the methodology. With this in mind, a group of 10 students chosen randomly from a first year of university study participated in the pilot study of the questionnaires. Following this amendments were made prior to implementing the main study.

Considering the make up of the population, of the eighty-three returned questionnaires, seventy-one had moved away from home to attend university, whilst twelve were living at home. All of the students were studying for full time BA or BSc degrees and were in year 1. Twenty-two of the students were classed as mature students (that is, over the age of 21). In a future study, comparisons between the responses of the mature and 18-year old students will be made. To analyse the data, the responses to the closed questions are presented as percentages with actual numbers also being given. For the explanations, common themes are grouped and presented.

### **Research Results and Discussion**

In answer to the question, 'What are your reasons for further study?', 90% (n=75) stated that they had decided to embark upon higher education study because the course was necessary for their future career plans, whereas the remainder of the students (10%, n=8) questioned indicated that it was their interest in the subject.

The table below illustrates the degree classes that the students canvassed are aiming for:

Table 1: Aim of Degree Class

I	II(1)	II(2)	III	Pass
19% (n=16)	74% (n=61)	7% (n=6)	0	0

The participants were of the view that there was a great divide between the methods of teaching in schools and those employed in university. 95% (n=79) recorded that school teaching was of a very formal nature whilst in university the focus was upon independent learning. As recorded in the introduction (see Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2009) students' perceptions of independent learning can be rather poor and this view is supported by this study where 63% (n= 52 ) of students indicated that they felt nervous about independent study. The main reason given for this finding related to difficulties in being self disciplined. One student wrote, 'I am concerned I won't be disciplined enough'. Allied to this theme of independent learning, a number of students (21%, n=17) responded that they were worried about deadlines. From the responses, it appears that the difference between school and university was the formality of the school process which included detailed notes being provided by the teachers, regular tests in the subject being studied, a more structured timetable, more assessments, more supervision, more coursework and more contact time between teacher and pupil.

Those questioned were also of the opinion that there was a great deal of difference in teaching styles between further and higher education. 6% (n=5) stated that pupils were 'spoon fed' in further education. Thereafter, a series of differences were recorded, the responses being articulated differently by each of those replying, but with some common themes. The differences, in no particular order, were:

1. It was easier to take notes in school.
2. University had bigger classes to the detriment of the students.
3. It was difficult to express an opinion verbally in university lectures.
4. One had to formulate one's own view of what and what not to record at university.
5. The relaxed attitude in university lectures facilitated the learning process.
6. Learning was a more formal process in further education.
7. There was less nagging in university!
8. One received a better explanation of the subject at university
9. More use of power point aided the note taking process in university
10. Classes in further education contained more discussion.

11. There was less interaction between students and staff in university.
12. University teaching delivered more information at any given point in time.
13. There was too much pressure in the first week of the academic year to deliver assignments and essays in university.
14. Having to 'discover' for oneself in university.
15. The reading required beyond the university lectures.

It is evident that the reasons presented above suggest that one of the main differences between further and higher education was the need to develop independent learning skills. A number of suggestions to ease the concerns raised above are presented later. However, the points raised above are supported by the literature. For example, Ballinger (2002) points out that students often have difficulties in drawing up their own timetable.

When asked about their feelings towards having to study independently, 60% (n=50) admitted to being nervous, 39% (n=32) were excited and one student thought that the experience was an isolating one. The response to the question as to how they felt about the onus being on them to study revealed that 45% (n=37) were worried or anxious, 43% (n=36) thought that this would not be problematical, 5 students failed to answer, 3 did not understand the question, one responded that he preferred the school approach of 'set notes and heavy staff involvement' and one that it required self discipline.

When asked whether the undertaking of further reading presented any difficulties, 61% (n=51) considered this not to be a problem whereas 39% (n=32) were anxious about embarking upon such a step. This finding is rather surprising given the suggestion by Marland (2003) that students need specific help to develop higher reading skills.

The pace of learning in university did not appear to present a difficulty with 78% (n=65) of students of the view that the tempo was correct, 14% (n=12) too fast, 1% (n=1) too slow with 6% (n=5) not answering. 93% (n=77) of those who engaged in the questionnaire thought that being a part of a large lecture group posed no fears for them with only 7% (n=6) having a feeling of nervousness or apprehension. Such a finding contradicts the suggestion by Smith (2002,) where he argues that a large lecture theatre can make students feel anxious and inhibited. However, it could be argued that the students are not actually anxious about being in large groups but are not confident to raise questions in such a setting.

Encountering the question 'Do you understand how to reference?' 91% (n=76) responded yes and 9% (n=7) no. 61% (n=51) of the respondents felt that skills acquired in further education equipped them to deal with the discipline of study at university whilst 38% (n=32) held the contrary view. The reasons provided by the latter focussed again upon the requirement of independent learning. Ballinger (2002) points out that the most prominent difference between school and higher education is the fact that at school teachers thoroughly prepare students for examinations whereas at university students are encouraged to become autonomous learners. Based upon this Ballinger (2002: 104) states, 'it is therefore essential that at degree

level students are provided with enough support to facilitate independent work and autonomous thinking'. This is supported by a student in this study when she suggested that 'school is more learning and remembering whereas university is more applying your knowledge.'

When asked 'Can you make any suggestions as to how the transition from school to university could be made easier?' 17% (n=14) had no suggestions and 20% (n=17) gave no response. Of the remainder, there were almost as many answers as respondents. However, a number of common themes emerged which, in no particular order, were:

1. Lecturers need to proceed more slowly in their delivery and repeat important points.
2. More interaction with second and third year students is necessary to glean from their experiences of the learning process.
3. Further education establishments should provide students with more independence when learning to smooth the transition.
4. A greater concentration on study skills is required, particularly in the first weeks of university life.
5. A written timetable should be disseminated to ease the stress of the first week.
6. There needs to be more tutor/student contact.
7. More time requires to be spent in smaller teaching groups.
8. University teaching, in the first year of a student's course, should be a gradual progress from school to university methods of study.
9. More pre university visits should be arranged, perhaps with summer schools, so that the transition process can be adequately explained.

The responses can perhaps be summarized succinctly in the words of one student who wrote that university lecturers should be aware of students' knowledge and educational backgrounds. This is a strong point and is echoed by Ballinger (2002: 107) who stated: "First year students are heterogeneous, and an awareness and understanding of their educational backgrounds prior to degree highlights the absolute necessity of being sensitive to the transitional process." Smith (2003) also made this point, drawing attention to the fact that universities are provided with little or no information about the students who progress to them, particularly as to whether there are any concerns of an academic or social nature.

This is supported by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2009) which stated that in every other educational transition (for example, primary to secondary school) the student's educational profile is sent with him but this does not happen in the further education to higher education transition. Moreover, the Department concluded that the system needs to be responsive to the needs of students, flexible enough to adapt to ever changing circumstances and supportive of the students to

ensure their progress to becoming independent learners (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2009).

### **Recommendations from Data**

Having collected and analysed this data, the next question to be asked is, 'how can this transition from further to higher education be accommodated?' The options are myriad and the permutations of each one almost infinite but some propositions, their merits or perhaps lack of them, are advanced here. It should be remembered that the data quite often illustrates that students prefer, or at least perceive little difficulty with, the learning opportunities offered in higher education but nevertheless, there is still evidence to suggest that the transition can be made easier.

There is a groundswell of authority for the view that schools need to do more to prepare students for the new experience of university learning. In theory of course this is an admirable suggestion. However, it has to be seen in the context of the pressure on secondary schools to have their pupils succeed, with the best possible result, at their A level examinations.

Stronger links between schools and universities so that students will not, on making the transition, be met by the unexpected may help with the transition (See Ballinger, 2002 for example). Again, this theory is laudable but in practical terms numerous difficulties can be envisaged. What university will link with which school? What group of universities will link with what schools? On the assumption that visits from one to the other will be fairly minimal (anything more would interfere with the school curriculum and university curriculum) what good would they be in any event?

Summer Schools at universities may be useful so that students can familiarise themselves with the university process. This suggestion has its merits. There would be no requirement for detailed and perhaps complicated links between schools and universities. A Summer School would provide the student with an induction into the new learning process without overwhelming schools with this task. However, there are drawbacks, one of the main being that different universities will have their own learning style, although with a common theme, and a student attending one Summer School for a given university may find her/himself in another university with a different learning style, to the student's disadvantage.

In analysing the responses of those participating in this study, one student who commented perhaps holds the key to the solution of the problem. The point was that university teaching, in the first year of a course, should be a gradual progression from school to university. Based upon this, it could be suggested that universities hold 'transition workshops' for all new students. It should be noted that in order for these to be successful, they should take place over a number of weeks and not just focus upon the first week, as Owen (2002) suggests that such programmes can produce an overload of information. These could involve a weekly seminar for a number of weeks where students are taught effective study skills. The question as to whether each course should have a compulsory 'Study Skills' module as part of the first year of study could be raised. A number of university courses already provide these opportunities but they are by no means the expectations of all universities and

quite often such strategies are aimed at students who have particular needs rather than to the general student population (see the FE2HE project for example). A suggestion may be that during the summer interim period between school and university, students could be sent 'transitional packs' of information to aid the move.

With the increase in technological advances, it may be possible for students to be provided with a DVD or a computer package to help them develop or indeed increase their awareness of the differences between further and higher education. Furthermore, the use of peer support or 'buddies' is becoming more frequently used (Campbell & Campbell, 1997) and such initiatives may be beneficial if rolled out to all universities.

It was also noted in the review of the literature that the jump from further to higher education is the only transition in education where the new teachers (lecturers) are not given any information on their incoming students. It could be argued that this should be changed by providing further education students with a profile for them to keep and to be passed onto university staff during the months before entry. Such a suggestion may fit in with the proposal made by the National Audit Office (2007:10) when they suggest that universities should spend time "getting to really know their students and how, generally, they feel about their particular course of study and the culture and amenities offered in the institution".

As far as recommendations are concerned, therefore, the establishment of 'transition modules' which span at least the first semester of the first year, if not the whole first year, should be implemented across all degree programmes in all institutions and students should have some form of profile that follows them from further to higher education.

## **Conclusion**

This study reaches the conclusion that there is a noticeable difference between the methods of teaching employed in schools and those utilised in universities. In summary, the school process is one where the student is provided with set notes, regular assignments and regular testing to facilitate the learning of the subject in hand. The process of acquiring knowledge in a university setting is a somewhat different process, having lectures and classes as its nucleus, but then requiring the student to embark on his or her own investigations. This is referred to as independent learning. The object is to facilitate the smooth transition from the one system to the other, thus enabling the student to achieve his potential.

In summary, the above paper has made a number of recommendations based upon the research study. Although, the data suggests that the teaching and learning styles may not present overwhelming difficulties to students, it is clear that these methods may need to be more accessible to students during the transition phase.

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