

## **Supporting students with the transition to university in a Covid-19 world: expectations and reality**

**Sonia Hood**

University of Reading, UK

**Edward Powell**

University of Reading, UK

### ***Presentation abstract***

In the spring of 2021 concerns were being raised in the Teaching and Learning community at the University of Reading regarding the incoming cohort of students. With such disruption to their education would they be adequately prepared for university level study? What impact would this, in turn, have on support services, like Study Advice, and retention and progression rates? And what of our returning students? Are they adequately prepared for the academic challenges they will face at the next level of study? As a result, a university-wide working group was established to research the issue and offer solutions to support students and staff with the 2021 transition of our new and returning students. This paper will report on the findings from focus groups with year 13 students and sixth-form tutors, and questionnaire data gathered from our current students during the summer of 2021. It will highlight the perceived academic strengths and development areas from their various perspectives and their beliefs as to what issues they will face with transitioning to the next level. We will share our university's response to this; how we supported students with their academic transition this academic year. Finally, we will report whether our predictions as to what students would present to Study Advice this year materialised, how we believe the Covid-19 pandemic will continue to affect students in the coming years, and how that in turn will affect demand levels and types of support we as a Learning Development service will offer.

## ***Community response***

This was an excellent session: thank you for sharing the insights you gained from engaging with FE practitioners and students, which will help us think about our own transition support for the coming year. The idea that we need to make more space over the whole first year (and beyond) to develop independent learning habits certainly resonates with what we're finding at Salford – it's a real challenge where, as your work suggests, concerted effort from both Learning Developers and academics is needed. I also wanted to mention that colleagues did some work under our Academic Transition project to look at how BTEC students are taught to understand how we can better scaffold their transition into HE-level study, and this led the university to focus on introducing more formative assessment, more personalised support, stronger cohort identity, and repetition of key learning concepts, amongst other things. (ES).

I think it's interesting to think about each year group's transition; how are the engagement and skills challenges different? E.g., the 2019 intake started university in person (so are not 'online natives') and, in our experience at least, seemed quite keen to get back to campus when that finally became possible in 2021-22. The 2020 intake were more like 'online natives' and for them, in-person university in the second year could seem uncomfortable, more like an outlier. Then you have the 2021 and onwards intakes who should be used to a more hybrid approach from the start; they might come in with more of a 'deficit' in some areas (I hate using the word, but you will get my point) but be more digitally savvy and conditioned where education is concerned. I have noticed much more student concern about exams at university since the lockdowns. It is interesting that you have a gradual trend back towards face-to-face for one-to-one appointments – we've not completely experienced that this year. It started about 50/50 face-to-face and online; face-to-face then fell off the radar when the Omicron variant of Covid-19 arrived and has not really bounced back (although it has a little). More like 70% of our appointments have been online, despite always offering face-to-face too (slightly skewed by us being a School where many of our students are off-campus, part-time, work, do placements all day etc.).

Thank you for this session. It was really helpful to see the process you went through to develop your support and resources. I too have never before had to think in terms of such distinct 'cohorts'. I really agree with one of the comments from the chat, that for the 2021-22 academic year, it was the second-year/ level 5 students who really needed lots of

support after an isolating level 4 experience. The overall intervention is clearly very inclusive, but one question I had in the back of my mind, was whether there was (or is any ongoing) impact or implication for people who come from non-traditional routes (mature entrants), and whether you have been able to capture and anticipate any change to their needs post-pandemic. Thanks again!

I found the way you have described and evidenced the process of supporting students and staff through recent changes really robust. I was not able to follow the link to your Study Smart resource but based on your discussion I can see similar trends with the work led by LD colleagues at my institution, demonstrating similar concerns and initiatives were present across the sector. I also thought that complementing this student-directed resource with a staff guide was an excellent idea, ensuring that the resource is thoroughly understood as part of the wider institutional support effort. This rigorous, evidence-based work on supporting student transition to HE is definitely one dimension of LD work that should be further developed post-pandemic. (AC).

This session raised a number of important issues regarding transitioning into HE, which was very timely due to the circumstances entrants currently find themselves in. In particular, this session made me think about the key role LD has in supporting transitions and how some of what has been implemented in this institution (and others) could be added to my institutions' approach to transitioning into HE. I am currently working on an online module to support transition into HE so I found the session quite inspirational. It has also given me hope that what I am currently working on has significance beyond my institution. (SBM).

### ***Editorial comment***

That transition to university is a process that takes longer than an induction week has long been recognised (Tinto, 1988) but during the past ten years it is an area that has attracted particular focus, with the advent of pre- and post-arrival online modules and inductions (Shahabudin, Hood and Reid, 2018; Jamieson and Nolan, 2019), and 'Study Guides' aimed at supporting students not only in securing university places but also preparing for and adapting to the changes (Cottrell, 2012; Bartholomew and Withers, 2019). This presentation disseminated the findings of a research study conducted at the University of

Reading, where a cross-university working group researched in the summer of 2021 with prospective students, to identify developmental needs for incoming level 3 and 4 students joining in September 2021. These students were often direct entry students from further education, where they had experienced 18 months of disruption due to Covid-19.

The participants reported back similar findings in their own institutions including increased mental health challenges and worries about exams, and provided insights into the variations in students' attitudes to returning to campus and preferences for online and/or face-to-face support. An observation relating to changes in student behaviour with the advent of the Omicron variant is a further sobering reminder that this is an ongoing situation and of the importance, as identified by the authors, of working with academic colleagues, as well as school and FE partners to be able to 'pick-up' and respond quickly to issues to provide timely and effective support.

This is a rare example of proactive research being taken beyond the university, where the presenters were commended on their engagement with further education (FE) and students' pre-arrival through empirical data gathering. In response to the presenters' recognition that there are often colleagues in HEIs with links to FE, a first step in this type of initiative can be building rapport with colleagues involved in access, widening participation, and outreach programmes who will have established relationships with schools and FE.

### ***Authors' reflection***

This session made us reflect upon the value of building stronger relationships with our secondary schools and colleges to fully understand issues of transition. We appreciate that there may be areas within our university already engaging in this way, yet communication needs to be strengthened if we are to truly understand the issues of transition. In addition, our research did suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic, and the understandable pressures put on FE institutions to ensure students had sufficient subject knowledge, meant there was little room for academic skills development. This puts us, as Learning Developers, at the forefront of supporting students (and staff) – an opportunity for us to raise our profile and value within our institutions. And while we will continue to deal with the impact of the pandemic, we can only predict the skills students may need additional support to develop.

Our strength this year came in our ability to communicate within our team and with our academic colleagues, to 'pick up' common 'issues' early and react with new webinars and resources. With improved communication and links with our FE partners, we should be in a better position to offer the support that will be needed to ensure our students are effectively supported to succeed in HE.

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### ***Author details***

Sonia Hood is Study Advice Manager at the University of Reading. Her research interests are in improving students' self-efficacy with regard to their academic writing and transitions to university.

Edward Powell is a Study Adviser at the University of Reading. His research interests are in the role of learning developers in decolonising the curriculum, and in the professionalisation of learning development.