

The current context

In the schools, colleges and university departments visited, the needs of students in transition are taken seriously. There are strong links between North Eastern schools and colleges and North Eastern Universities, and some schools and colleges have active relationships with universities outside the region, particularly the more Northern universities and Oxford and Cambridge. The initial project conference within the university, and project visits to schools and colleges, indicate that although some strong transition schemes are supporting students well, and some networks are being used to a full extent, there are still areas of ignorance on the part of schools, colleges and universities about each other's provision, which could be more strongly addressed. Responses from students in transition also indicate that communication with them and for them could be better planned and co-ordinated, to maximise the positive effect of what is provided. This report indicates what good practice is in place, offers ways of understanding the process of transition, and indicates what can be built upon the current foundations.

What are student needs?

Life transition of any kind is stressful. However well we may be able to imagine what lies ahead, nothing prepares us fully for the lived experience of transition. However, stress can be lessened, and aspiration enhanced, if we have good access to information and support. Much of the guidance offered about university transition is generic, and is offered to groups of potential applicants, but an important learning outcome of the project is that applicants' needs differ greatly, and effective support has to be individualised to some extent. Students need:

- Awareness-raising as to why they should consider university application
- Support for their self-belief: their aspiration to apply, study and succeed
- A range of 'taster' experiences which enables them to imagine life at university
- A sound programme of support and guidance through the application process
- Practical information, for example about finance, transport and housing, university attendance and assessment processes
- A continuing programme of orientation and practical support on arrival at university

The section below draws upon school and college student and staff experience to identify good practice.

What makes a difference?

Start early!

Colleges generally have two years to prepare students for university entry, and schools have much longer. Some Northumberland schools have programmes which start in Year 9, or earlier, and the experience of the University of the First Age shows that primary school children can respond well to an introduction to the university environment. It is noticeable that in some schools, the respective endpoints for students - academic, vocational, university, non university - are identified very early on, by year 7. It can then be very difficult for students to identify with the aspirations of a different set of students at the school, and to believe in their own ability to achieve. Programmes designed to raise aspiration, to enable students to visualise themselves as university students in the future, include visits to schools by university students and staff, but importantly also involve visits to campus by young people, where they can engage in activities with students and staff on site.

Clear coherent preparation programme

All schools and colleges visited have a programme of preparation for university entry, which typically starts in Y11 in schools, and at the college application stage for college students. But not all students understand what is being offered, when and why. Changes in staffing in some schools mean that students in Y12 and Y13 are being offered something different from their older or younger peers, and they do not see coherence in the overall programme. Publishing the whole programme of support and opportunities (with indicative dates where these are not fully known), and making this known to students from Y11 onwards increases student confidence in the support they receive.

The published programme needs to be supplemented with good communication routes to alert students to up-coming guidance opportunities, UCAS application deadlines and to the opportunity to attend off-site events

Consistency of staffing

Some schools have a 'rolling programme' of year tutors and co-ordinators, which means that the role of supporting Y12 / 13 students has to be learned afresh each year. In colleges, changing roles and responsibilities among staff may lead to similar problems. Whilst many students express sympathy for someone new in role, and many staff express frustration at the system they are in, this approach to support for university entry detracts significantly from its effectiveness. The most confident students and staff were found in schools and colleges where the staff involved in transition have a deep fund of knowledge and experience, combined with a wide personal network of contacts with universities and relevant agencies. At the other extreme are students who feel that their needs are not high on the organisation's agenda, where staffing support is not trusted to be knowledgeable, and where their own expectations of success are diminished by the experience they encounter.

Enthusiasm and encouragement

The positive effect on applicants of significant encounters with school, college and university staff, students and others who are enthusiastic and encouraging cannot be underestimated. Students tell of one-off encounters with students or staff on university visit days, or of longer-standing relationships with subject teachers or guidance workers which have 'tipped the balance' for them and enabled them to imagine themselves as university students. This helps to sustain the personal self-belief and ambition which enables them to overcome the practical hurdles of transition.

Access to a range of opportunities

The schools and colleges visited have access to a range of opportunities which are offered to all their Y12 / 13 students, and there are examples where attendance at some of the events is compulsory. These opportunities are further discussed below under 'What kinds of transition experience are on offer?' and include:

- Guidance events for both students and parents
- Programme of support for application and transition through tutorials
- HE roadshows offered on a regional basis or at own school / college
- Visits to their school / college by university staff / students
- Assemblies to discuss university related issues (not popular with our respondents)
- Generic university Open Days, both across the North East and more widely
- Subject-specific visits / interviews in university departments
- Summer schools and other residential university experience
- Student shadowing

It is very noticeable that in some schools and colleges, students are willing to seek out access to university Open Days and other events as individuals, and also take responsibility for finding information themselves about courses, finance and accommodation. Their school or college encourages them to do this, and in some cases supports them with funding for visits. In other cases, some students say they are aware of opportunities such as Open Days, but they are 'too far,' 'in the holidays,' 'at the weekend,' 'in school time,' or that they got round to applying for them too late. It is important that school and college tutors build student confidence in independent action, and offer official encouragement for students to prioritise such opportunities.

Individual attention

Mature students in colleges particularly welcome access to guidance from staff in college and in university who address their individual circumstances. This can include consideration of the practicalities of travel, childcare and their entitlement to financial support alongside receipt of benefits or wages. Information about their expected first year timetable, and the timing and nature

of assessment requirements is also essential to their decision about where and how to attend university.

This kind of information would greatly help all incoming students. Students of any age need to know whether they can balance study with work to supplement their income, where they can live and be able to get to university on time, and what kind of assessment regime they will be involved in.

Identifying with the process

Students of all ages in the transition project say how they have welcomed, or would welcome, one-to-one time with 'someone like me.' As well as accessing the practical information (which is often lacking), they need ways of gaining the confidence that 'someone like me' can manage the difficulties of transition and university attendance, enjoy and succeed – and personal anecdotal advice as to how it can be done.

Students who have had access to student shadowing, or similar one-to-one sharing of university life with current students, have particularly benefited from the experience. Those with siblings or close friends who have been through university application and attendance also feel that they have sources of up-to-date personal advice and support. Applicants whose parents attended university generally feel supported by them, although they understand that their parents' experience of university may be out-dated. What is important is having parents who understand and engage with the university application process, especially regarding application for finance. Guidance events for parents are therefore appreciated, and the opportunity to sit with a parent at the computer at home with application materials and 'work it all out together.'

Learning independently

When asked about their learning experiences at school and at college, most students say that they have a range of learning experiences, from whole-group teaching and note-taking led by a teacher, through group discussion or investigation, to independent study. Different students have different learning preferences, although there was general liking for learning in small groups where the contact with the teacher is felt to be more individual and personal. Most students perceive that they will have to learn more independently at university: whilst all have heard of lectures, and are expecting to be in large lecture groups, there is a lack of knowledge and understanding about seminars, lab classes, field trips, small-group work and individual tutorials. Some students look forward to learning more independently, and feel that they are developing the necessary skills. Most are concerned about achieving the balance of time for study and working for assessment with time for other aspects of university or family life. Living independently (for those who choose to study away from home) is often seen as a bigger challenge than studying independently, with finance at the top of most students' 'worry list,' and some respondents wish that they could access life-skills classes at school or college. Data from another project indicates that the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme may be useful in this respect.

Learning at university

'The lecture' is the big unknown for many of our respondents. They understand what it might entail, but have difficulty imagining themselves in this learning environment. Some who have been on campus visits are disappointed that they have 'only been shown' a lecture theatre, but have not attended a lecture. Others, mainly those on student shadowing experience or summer schools, have experienced lectures – either 'real' ones, or ones put on specially for the visitors. Simply attending either kind of lecture seems to offer genuine support and relief. Most say that they enjoyed the experience; most say that they now understand what it entails, and that the nervousness about lectures has gone.

Even allowing for the fact that time spent in timetabled activity at university varies greatly between courses, there is great disparity between students as to what their expectations are of study time in any particular week. Some, on seeing four hours of lectures on the timetable, assume that they are free of study for the rest of the week. On the whole, the mature students have a more realistic work ethic than their younger counterparts. A clear indication from universities of expectations about attendance, private study and working for assessment would be helpful for all students.

What kinds of transition experience are on offer?

From the work we have undertaken, there appear to be three types of transition activity available to students in schools and colleges.

Firstly, there are ***generic transition activities***. These are activities or resources which are aimed at encouraging students to go to university in the first place, or are aimed at raising aspirations of young people that university really is an option for them. These tend to be school or college driven, often begin quite early (i.e. before years 11 and 12) and are centred upon visits to roadshows, exhibitions or university, or visits from university students and staff. Visits are fairly generic in that potential students would get a guided tour of the campus, student union, library, and other facilities. They may get to see a lecture theatre but not necessarily attend a lecture, and general financial information is also included. These activities would not involve parents (if appropriate) directly.

Secondly, there are ***focused transition activities***. These are activities or resources which are aimed at students who are in their final years of school or college, who may still be unsure about actually going to university, but who have ideas of what they might study (and perhaps where) if they do go. These tend to be university driven, are concentrated in the final year of school or college and are much more geared towards actual experience. Examples would be the PARTNERS bite-size uni, where students can live as a student for a week, other residential programmes, student shadowing, and student ambassadors. Such focused transition activities are usually subject-specific, and so a potential student wanting to study medicine would experience very different activities from one aiming to study psychology, for example. Attending actual lectures is more usual and some activities would involve parents (where appropriate) directly.

Finally, there are ***pedagogical transition activities***. These are activities which are usually additional to the focused transition activities. They are normally university led, are subject-specific and are aimed at offering potential students a *real* taste of university life from a pedagogical perspective. Attendance at an actual lecture, seminar, or tutorial group would be a part of the transition activity, with a focus on university level study skills and independent learning. Access students in colleges may find that study skills courses are compulsory, with a focus on independent learning. Again, these transition activities are subject-specific and there are huge variances as to what is on offer to some students and not others. Some activities will include access to module descriptions, examples of types of assignments, and assessment criteria.

Some relationships between university and school or college, such as the Newcastle University PARTNERS scheme, encompass all three types of activity.

	<i>Generic transition activities</i>	<i>Focused transition activities</i>	<i>Pedagogical transition activities</i>
Aims	To encourage and raise aspirations of University as an option	To encourage those still unsure but who have ideas of what they might study	To offer a <i>real</i> taste of university life from a pedagogical perspective.
Led by	School/College	University more generically	University more subject specific
Age range	Year 4 upwards	Years 11 / 12	Years 12 / 13
Experience	Visits, tours	Residential experiences, tours, contact with other students	Lectures, discussions, tutorials, assignment outlines
Parental involvement	No	Yes	No
Project examples	HE roadshows, open days, visits to schools/colleges	Bitesize Uni, medical student-shadowing, students doing their own activities with friends already at University	Northumbria conference, College study skills programmes for access students