Supporting the transition into Higher Education – preparation and emotion

Gareth Hughes
Psychotherapist and Research Lead – Student Wellbeing
Questions

How prepared are your students for the beginning of university?

In which areas are they most and least prepared?
Transition and emotion

It has long been recognised that the transition to higher education can be a stressful process. It is not unusual for students going through transition to experience psychological distress, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, a reduction in self-esteem and isolation.

At Derby we conducted a research study of 353 randomly sampled students using clinical measures of distress (CORE GP) and a questionnaire about their early experiences. This was administered in the first 6 weeks.

63% of students scored in the clinical range - their distress levels were above every day emotional experiences.

There was no difference in average distress levels between students who had moved into student accommodation and those commuting from their family home.
Correlations

Clinical range
- Felt lonely
- Felt overwhelmed
- Believed they should be doing better
- Were struggling to make decisions
- Felt restless
- Felt homesick
- Felt angry

Non clinical range
- Felt they had settled in
- Felt part of the community
- Believed negative feelings were normal and temporary
- Felt ready and prepared to start their course
Personal narratives

I am…

I am not

I can…

I can't

I will…

I will not…
Expectations

Flexible

Robust

Multiple

Hopeful

Sophisticated

Rigid

Brittle

Singular

Fearful

Simplistic
Student’s ability to visualise

In research we conducted with 6th form teachers, they identified that many of their students had difficulty in visualising possible future events or life beyond their own current experiences.

Student difficulties with using their own imagination to predict possible future events and rehearse possible difficulties, seemed to act as a foundation for other problems – because they can’t visualise the possibilities, they cannot prepare and don’t see the value of the support available.
Priming and preparation

Students who expect to feel homesick are more likely to feel a higher level of distress

If you see multiple possibilities, both good and bad, you are more likely to take steps to ensure good outcomes and avoid bad

If you see only one possibility (or no clear vision of what might be possible at all) there is little point in expending effort to be better prepared
Lack of motivation = lack of skills

Why expend effort acquiring skills if you can’t see the need for them?

Students beginning university can lack academic skills, practical life skills, social skills and self-management skills.
Questions – and what can we do?
Arrival

Mere Exposure Effect (The Familiarity Principle)
Familiarity with environments
Result

Heightened fear, caution and hyper-vigilance

Lowered feeling of control

Reduced cognitive functioning

Filtered through and mediated by skills, knowledge, priming, level of familiarity / alien-ness, external factors and influences, narrative coherence and actual experience of the new environment
Emotional hi-jacking
Negative emotions

Many students appear to experience problems with self-soothing and self-regulation.

The presence of negative emotions can in itself become distressing if you are unable to manage them.

This can create a negative spiral that students find difficult to stop.
Leaving previous safety

Going to university requires students to, at least partially, let go of previous networks – even if they are going to their local university.

This can leave some students in a difficult cultural ‘in-between’ space.

It also means losing people, places and strategies that helped them to meet their own needs.
Emotional arousal / reduced cognitive function

Lowered feeling of control

Ability to manage negative emotions

Narratives and expectations placed under pressure

Mere exposure effect

Leave old networks

Filtered through and mediated by skills, knowledge, priming, level of familiarity / alien-ness, external factors and influences, narrative coherence and actual experience of the new environment

Narratives and expectations placed under pressure

Sensitivity: Internal
Questions and what could we do?
Needs theories

Beginning with Maslow (without the pyramid) needs theories suggest that for individuals to thrive they must meet their underlying needs in balance.

These needs are physical, psychological and social and are shared across cultures – although the ways we seek to meet them will be culturally specific.

Good transition can be defined by a student’s ability to meet their underlying needs in their new environment.
Physical needs
Emotional needs

1. Security
2. Autonomy and control
3. Status
4. Privacy
5. Competence and achievement
6. Meaning and purpose
7. Attention
8. Intimacy
9. Connection to wider community
10. Fun and pleasure
Social neuroscience indicates that ‘feeling lonely’ has a significant impact on cognitive function, memory and performance (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008).

Tinto (2013) and others have consistently highlighted social integration and ‘belonging,’ as being key to persistence and achievement.

However, there are indications that many students arrive without key life and social skills to negotiate their university experience.
Learning approaches and their connection to... everything

Deep learning
Focus on subject
High achievement
Good wellbeing
More satisfied with teaching and learning
Focus on intrinsic motivation

Surface learning
Focus on grades
Lower achievement
Poor wellbeing (high anxiety)
Less satisfied
Focus on extrinsic motivation

(Postareff, 2016)
Bio-psycho-socio-academic view of academic performance

- Physical health
- Psychological health
- Social health
- Academic skills & work rate
Unable to meet needs in balance
Perceived negative experience overall
Fear paired to the environment

Homesickness
Imposter syndrome
Alienation
Academic anxiety
Doubts about persistence
Able to meet needs
Perceived positive experience overall
Increased confidence and sense of belonging
Gradual settling in - thriving
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Previous Experiences

Personal narratives

Expectations

Robust, flexible, multiple

Rigid, brittle, simplistic

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