## The Journey from Further Education to Higher Education

Smith, Kyle; ODonnell, Patrick

# The Journey from Further Education to Higher Education: an investigation into the 'lived experiences' of learners as they transition into and through the first year of higher education

**Patrick O'Donnell[1], Kyle Smith[1] and Aileen McGuigan[2]**,
[1]Perth College, University of the Highlands and Islands
[2]University of Dundee

**ABSTRACT**

The global trend towards the expansion of student participation in higher education study has resulted in unprecedented challenges to the sector as it seeks to respond to greater diversity in the student body and increased demand for academic support and flexibility in entry pathways. Unsurprisingly, this trend has been accompanied by a proliferation of research examining how universities and higher education are responding to the challenge of meeting the needs of a diverse population of students. This qualitative study, using a dual sector further education and higher education academic partner institution of a dispersed Scottish university as a case-study, investigates the 'lived experiences' of learners as they transition into and through the first year of higher education. The data analysis revealed three dominant enablers to student transitions: 'higher education demystification', 'student-centred peer support' and 'pastoral care'. The study recognises that student transitions are entangled in circumstances of time and place, as well as the unique dynamics of individual agency and interaction with others. However, by linking the student experiences to wider arcs of understanding on educational transitions, this small-scale study aims to contribute to broader discussions on how to forge better progression pathways between further education and higher education.

**Keywords:** *Transitions; higher education; further education; conceptual models; identity formation*

## INTRODUCTION

With respect to recognisable patterns and trends, it is clear that the growth of higher education study in Europe (from the 1990s) has been accompanied by a

greater diversity in the student body (Thomas, 2011). This diversity has been brought about by students drawn from a larger variety of ethnic, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, during the last two decades the student body in higher education has increasingly included a much wider range of age groups and prior-educational experiences. The unprecedented growth of people in employment undertaking part-time study through a mix of campus–based, distance and blended approaches to learning has also added to the variety. Overall, the massive expansion of higher education participation has resulted in unparalleled challenges to the sector as it seeks to respond to this greater diversity (Thomas, 2011: 77-78). The drive for wider participation in higher education, together with the continuing focus on student retention and progression, has contributed to the heightened awareness and interest in student transitioning into higher education - what is now commonly referred to as 'student transitions' (Hughes and Smail, 2014: 466-7).

The study reported in this article foregrounds how further education and higher education sector might create closer integration, more successful transitions and progression pathways as key aims. In doing so, it investigates student experiences and expectations – their perceptions of the sorts of enablers to success as well as the issues and challenges they confront as they move from further education studies and journey through their first year of higher education. The investigation also considers perceptions of student identities as they transition to higher education level study. It explores whether students' perceptions of identities exist around fixed notions of skills and performance or whether there is a composite and fluid identity that is socially constructed and negotiated through different experiences and settings (Brennan *et al*,. 2010: 137-8). There is considerable literature on student transitions and this study seeks to supplement this by exploring the lived experiences of students as they progress through their first year of a dual sector (FE/HE) university, identifying perceived challenges as well as successful enabling strategies and practices. The study not only seeks to inform wider discussions on how to forge better progression pathways between further education and higher education, but, it also suggest new research questions for further exploration on how student transitions within both further and higher education are conceptualised, resourced and engaged with.

## TRANSITIONING TO HIGHER EDUCATION: DEFINING THE NATURE, SCOPE AND CONTOURS

A salient question to consider here is: "what is meant by 'a transition' or transitions within the context of education and student learning?" The term 'transition' can be usefully conceptualised as the passage of change: it is embodied within notions of the shift from one phase, position or state to the next. For most of us, a transition relates to the sorts of progressive and regressive alterations in the passage of life - which involves a complex amalgam of physical, emotional and cognitive alterations and adjustments. Given that we are dealing with physical, emotional and cognitive adjustments that will be interacting together, the plural 'transitions' seems more appropriate. Therefore, for conceptual clarity this study will be using transitions as a single concept that denotes the plural. One intriguing aspect of the concept of students' transitions is the way these bring together a multiplicity of

factors and dynamics within one realm. Indeed, it is argued here that the phenomena of transitions within the realm of education is somewhat pluralistic in its outlook, displaying idiosyncratic tendencies inflected by multiple dynamics and engaging with complex non-linear social systems and processes (Maunder *et al,*. 2013: 140). These include the circumstances of time and place, the unique dynamics of individual subjectivity, agency and interaction with others (such as teachers, support staff and peers).

Transitions within the context of education are viewed, fundamentally, as a process of adjustment and change and so the metaphor of a 'journey' is often used to conceptualise the individual and the setting they operate and interact within. For example, from school to further education, school to higher education, or further education to higher education. These transitions can be seen as an educational undertaking with agreed markers or turning points which takes place at a 'pre-ordained time and in a certain place' (Gale and Parker 2014: 739). Further, students will undergo (in parallel) large and small adjustments as they exit from one educational experience and enter into, and through, a new and unfamiliar educational experience. Importantly, the transitions journey, also contains both retrospective and progressive aspects, creating continuities and decisive ruptures with previous educational experiences (Bathmaker, 2015: 73, Pike and Harrison 2010: 55)

Huon & Sankey, (2002: 1), suggest a form of meta-thinking takes root where students, during the transitions period, attempt to locate themselves within a wider network of significance: 'When students begin their first-year at university, they are required to re-organise the way they think about themselves, as learners, and as social beings'. Others such as Briggs *et al.,* (2012: 6) point to the centrality of social bonds within transitions: 'Adjustment includes making connections between pre-university experience and experience at university […] and is enhanced by the opportunity to form positive social relationships with other students and with staff.' Similarly, Wilcox *et al.,* (2005: 713) highlight a sense of belonging to a community: 'students have an urgent need to belong, to identify with others, to find a safe place and to negotiate their new identities […]. Maunder *et al.,* (2012: 139) and Morgan (2014: 110) draw similar conclusions about how successful transitions are linked to this sense of belonging to a community. Looking across the literature we can detect certain contours and characteristics of student transitions emerging. In particular, social-cognitive processes of belonging; of negotiating a sense of belonging and emotional attachment to a group, a community and institution. Yet, despite the emergence of these common themes within the literature, which have expanded the field of study, we must not lose sight of the fact that a transitional journey is complex. It is both deeply contextualised and where each individual's experience is unique. Educational transitions are characterised by multiple experiences, perspectives and meanings and is dependent on the individual student biographical disposition and the institutional setting. The imposition of any form of authoritative account or consensus on what a transitional journey in education actually comprises – predicting what the terrain and topography for this journey looks and feels like for <u>all</u> learners - is problematic. Indeed, for some commentators, research into educational transitions seems to bring no clear understanding on fundamental 'what' questions and 'why' questions. Gale and Parker (2014: 736-7) take issue with what they see as a lack of critical debate and

interrogation on educational transitions. Similarly, Briggs *et al.,* (2012: 2) suggest that the field of student transitions is under conceptualised'. Cuconato and Walther (2015: 291), provide a glimpse into why research on student transitions can be a multi-layered many-toned project:

Transitions are considered as crossroads of the life course at which individual processes of social integration as well as subjective identities are being negotiated and redirected. […] The liminality of transitions requires an extensive and continuous activity of interpretation, negotiation, reconciliation and decisions-making, which in many cases, is neither perceived nor recognised (and supported) in institutional contexts of regulating transitions.

Cuconato and Walther's (ibid) suggestion of a 'liminality,' - a term initially found in the field of anthropology to describe the sorts of identity and character changes that may take place during rituals - may be a useful way to comprehend the levels of complexity here. During the liminal period previous understandings dissolve and the continuity of tradition - ways of acting, responding and thinking - loses its way and becomes less certain, being replaced by something else not fully implanted. Thus, when researching student transitions, we are exploring the process of the dissonance and displacement between two positionalities; one in the past and the other emerging and advancing in response to a new educational setting.

Accepting Cuconato and Walther's (ibid) interpretation, it is reasonable to argue that the student leaving one educational setting and entering into a new educational setting will be in a 'liminal state' (an in-between state) between two educational identities. In making the necessary transitions to a new identity the student must strip away aspects of their old sense of self and embrace new attitudes and sensibilities that come together to fashion an altered identity: one coloured by the exigencies of the new educational setting. The transitional state of simultaneously jettisoning the familiar and embracing the unfamiliar can be characterised by a period of self-doubt, where the student identity is fractured and somewhat disembodied, neither fully in one identity category or the other. It is here that the notion of a liminal state helps to advance, but not necessarily crystallise, our understandings.

Taking a lead from the commentators we have looked at we can see a converging and intersecting of a range of open-textured factors and dynamics (such as individual emotional, cognitive and prior-experiences and expectations as well as institutional discourses and settings) that make student transitions resistant to simplistic and overarching explanation. Against this complexity we must recognise that any attempt to capture, delineate and specify what enhances students transitions will be a contingent and provisional account, open to modification.

Gale and Parker (2014: 737) usefully frame the somewhat fluid complexions and contours associated with student transitions by characterising it as 'the capability to navigate change'. In a sense we have two fluctuating catalysing features inextricably at play here; the 'inner self' and the 'external environment'. Student transitions, according to these commentators encapsulate a multidimensional process, part of which will comprise certain linear steps and dynamics, with other more fluid, and unpredictable, processes contingent on a range of subtle individual characteristics interacting with the external. The student transitions journey is perceived here in performative terms: demanding academic

ability, mental agility and robustness of the individual to engage with and transverse the challenging topography of the new educational landscape. For Gale and Parker (ibid) successful transitions are measured in terms of student engagement: how they negotiate, take ownership and participate in the dominant institutional structures and discourses. Institutional discourses exist in terms of their social setting: they simultaneously create conditions of possibility and constraint. They give meanings within a social context: they produce certain interpretative realities, hierarchical relations of power identities and, in this case, they construct academic identities, communities of accomplishment and achievement. Further, they produce social positions from which people are required to act, think, feel, behave and value.  As Benwell and Stokoe (2006: 88) propose '[…] institutions produce binary and asymmetrical roles: the expert (or institutional representative) who is invested in with institutional authority, and the non-expert (usually the client), who must be accommodated to the institutional norms.' Significantly, those working closely with the students, especially lecturers - as institutional representatives - play an important part in mediating these discourses. Ideas of transitions within the context of education intersect with and partly constitute a sophisticated and complex fabric, enmeshed with a range of social, environmental, emotional and cognitive aspects.

Whittaker, (2008: 5), reporting on a study of first year students, argues that student transitions are inextricably linked to the discourses of student engagement and empowerment. Drawing on earlier writers (Harvey *et al.,* 2006), Whittaker (2008: 18) considers academic integration and social integration as central pillars to any understandings of and interventions in student transitions. The term 'social integration' is used to describe the structure of social relationships, such as the size and density of a particular social network within the educational setting (Wilcox *et al.,* 2005: 708). As Brooman and Darwent (2014: 1524) note, social integration is the extent to which a student feels connected to the college environment, their peers and faculty, as well as being involved in wider campus activities (such as sports and clubs). Academic integration on the other hand, relates to motivational factors, how one engages with the academic content and workload. It also connects to levels of academic skills and aptitudes. Naturally, the student's previous educational experiences and attainments will be a major determining factor shaping the nature and scope of academic integration.  For Wilcox *et al*. (2005: 707), 'academic and social integration', is used 'to describe the extent to which students' achieve meaningful membership of the academic and social worlds of the university […]'.  Thus, for Wilcox *et al.,* (ibid) the forming of solid relationships is an integral dynamic of the transitional journey.

## TRANSITIONS JOURNEY: THE INTRODUCTION OF MILESTONES AND SIGNPOSTS

A number of researchers have proposed theoretical models that seek to guide interventions.  From the literature, the notion of three phase models has been employed as an approach to capture the discursive and complex dynamics associated with student transitions, placing them within what looks like a logical sequence of events. These phased models with their linear steps of progress can be appealing as they fit well into the notion of a journey and, in doing so, they seek

simplicity amid the cluttered complexities, thereby rendering the messy cognitive and emotional realities into a more manageable and more coherent set of processes. Whittaker, (2008: 18), draws on a version of Tinto's (1987) Model of Student Integration (depicted in three phases) as a fruitful way to conceptualise students negotiating the transitions into higher education. The phases are: 'separation'- this represents a departure from previous educational environment/setting; 'transition' – denotes the process of adjustment to their new educational environment/setting; and the final phase of 'incorporation' - denotes full integration and acceptance of and by, their new educational environment/setting. The salient point to consider here is that Tinto's writing has clearly prompted others to develop new models or draw on models from elsewhere in the search to conceptualise student transitions.  By way of example, Cheng, (2015: 3-8), usefully highlights 6 models for conceptualising student transitions including Bridges' Transition Model (2011) and 'U-Curve Theory of Adjustment' (Risquez *et al,.* 2008).

Even the most cursory exploration of the literature reveals that there are many other models depicting a form of student transitions, albeit with different signifiers and emphasis. This plurality of models reflects, in part, the diversity of both the case-studies under investigation and the theoretical underpinnings being adopted to unpack student transitions. Such transitional models offer considerable appeal for educationalist as they attempt to depict students on a journey of personal and academic development, with linear sequences or stages of adjustments and progressions. Critically, such models, by projecting how particular time bound experiences are consumed, endeavour to distil and, ultimately, to bring order to the sorts of fluid social, cultural and psychological complexities associated with the students' transitional journey. Such transitional models seek to illuminate and structure understandings, governing the paths of action and associated thinking. Taken together, such models have created conceptual scaffolding, for meaning and significance and this is critical to any process of formulating and managing measures to enhance transitions into and through the first year.

Uncritical acceptance and adoption of such models however can eliminate or side-line many interesting and potentially illuminating questions about how students engage with institutional discourses or how students conceptualise and understand their own transitions. Any given model depicting different phases of student transitions - however logical and persuasive - will likely obscure as much as it reveals about the set of experiences it seeks to capture. The student's sense of identity during their transitional journey becomes fluid and malleable, contingent on the actual educational experience and this is not fully appreciated or captured within the transitional models. The discussion so far on different theories, strategies and models are helpful to our understandings. However, they don't adequately address or unpack the issue surrounding whether the students themselves understand the transitional processes or journey through which they are going through during their first year. This potential limitation underscores the importance of the key aims of this study – the exploration of student lived experiences with respects to what they perceive as the most relevant aspects that enable successful transitions to higher education.

## METHODOLOGY

The study was based on developing an in-depth understanding of the student's experiences and therefore, a qualitative approach was adopted to capture the student voices and lived experiences of their transitions. This qualitative approach offered flexibility and was consistent with the dynamic nature of research involving learning about experiences and perceptions. The study is informed by two broad research questions: 'how can the further education learning experience prepare students progressing to the new demands of higher education study?' And 'how can the higher education setting facilitate successful student transitions?'

The data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth, one-to-one audio recorded interviews based on an outlined schedule of open-ended questions. This offered opportunities to explore particular issues and probe emerging perspectives and opinions. The interviews covered the experiences of students in their current (higher education) and previous (further education) teaching and learning settings. The interviews took place near the end of the students' first year in higher education level study. This was deemed appropriate as it allowed for students to give detailed retrospective accounts of their transitions from the further education setting to higher education, as well as their transitional journey within the first year at higher education. The interview data was supplemented by data gathered from two focus groups (t.n 21). The target individual one-to-one interview respondents were a sample of learners from Education and Social Care (n 7) Humanities and Social Sciences (n7).

The interviewees were selected from the first respondents to an email sent to first year higher education students studying at an academic partner institution of the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI). The prerequisite was that all respondents had to have transitioned from further education studies the previous year. Analysis followed an inductive approach that was concerned with generating understandings grounded in the perspectives of the participants. After each interview, a manual open-coding process was conducted to identify a range of phenomena in-text. Concepts were gathered from each interview and, using a constant comparison process, (Strauss and Corbin, 1997), comparable concepts were developed into themes across the data set which related to the research questions. The analysis focused on extracting meanings around students' initial expectations of studying at higher education, specifically the extent to which their expectations were met and any issues around teaching, learning and support. Attention also focused on extracting data on how the further education experience prepared students for the new academic rigours of the higher education setting. To address concerns of researcher bias and reliability of the identified themes, the transcripts were selected randomly for thematic analysis by an independent researcher to verify reliability of the themes. Details of the thematic results were also discussed with a select number of the interview respondents (4) who confirmed their validity in relation to the transitional experience voiced.

The themes and insights developed from individual interviews were used as discussion points for the focus groups. The focus groups provided an important opportunity to validate the themes identified from individual one-to-one interviews. Significantly, the focus groups did not reveal any discrepancies or contradictory data that threatened the validity of the overarching themes identified. As well as

validating the themes, the focus groups also provided the opportunity to assemble more contextual details and understanding on shared perspectives on the transitional journeys. In addition to the individual interviews and two focus groups, the study also conducted individual interviews with those involved in teaching in both further education and higher education (n6). These individuals were also personal academic tutors (PATs) for both further and higher education students. This round of interviews were used to verify the emerging themes on student transitions. At the same time, they helped to provide a more rounded picture on transitional journeys within this particular institutional context. Collectively, the range of interviews allowed the authors to tap into a rich reservoir of data as well as helping to locate the student experiences within a wider backdrop.

The interviews were conducted in accordance with recognised ethical protocols (Ethical approval was sought and given by the university). The interview respondents were given ethical statements with full details of the purpose of the study including information on data collection and storage. They received a copy of the interview questions prior to the interview taking place. The actual interviews took approximately 20-30 minutes and respondents were also given the opportunity to check interview transcripts for accuracy if they wished to do so. The storage of all interview data – audio recordings, transcripts and interview ethical forms - was encrypted/password protected and the confidentiality and anonymity of all respondents respected. Access to all interview data was restricted to the authors only. The interview data will not be archived for future secondary studies/research. With respects to limitations, the authors recognise that the individual one-to-one student interview sample was small (n14). The other data gathering approaches - focus groups (tn21) and individual one-to-one interviews with those involved in teaching (n6) help to offset this limitation and provide a potentially rich source of cross-referencing data, as well as helping to providing a more holistic picture of the student transitions within the further education to higher education context.

## RESULTS: STUDENT'S PERCEPTIONS ON WHAT ENABLED SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS INTO AND THROUGH THE FIRST YEAR OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Overall, the study found that all of the transitioning students interviewed were generally confident with their capabilities in negotiating and adapting to the new rules associated with their higher education setting: no major tensions with respects to the student's social and academic transitions from further education to higher education were found. Moreover, the study provided useful data that depicts how the transitions journey involves a process of student negotiations, the construction of a new identity and a sense of belonging as well as acquiring new academic skills with respects to learning and knowledge construction. However, this was not as linear a process as the transitions models cited here suggest. Broadly, from both individual interviews and focus groups, the study found that there was a strong perception from students that the lecturers teaching higher education were more meticulous - in terms of adhering to course rules such as referencing, assessment guidance/deadlines - than their further education counterparts. Although it has to be noted that the lecturers interviewed in this study

teach both further and higher education, and the students observations underscore underlying differences between the two sectors in terms of course structure, conventions and rules and demands. In addition, all of the interview respondents explicitly mentioned the value of higher education induction in helping with the initial transitions process. However, there was a caveat. It was suggested by some, that the traditional 'ice-breakers' and 'team-building' activities played out at the very start of the course, should continue beyond the initial two day induction period. This finding suggests the importance of building social networks at the start of the course.

The study identified three dominant themes across the data-set, referred to as 'enablers', which facilitated student transitions: (1) 'higher education demystification,' (2) 'student-centred peer support' and (3) 'pastoral care'. The demystification of higher education enabler was experienced within the further education experience and in many respects it provided an important foundation that bridged further education and higher education. As such, the higher education demystification enabler explicitly relates to the research question: how can the further education learning experience prepare students progressing to the new demands of higher education study? Both the student-centred peer support and pastoral care enablers refer to the first year of higher education and explicitly relate to the research question: how can the higher education setting facilitate successful student transitions?

*Higher Education Demystification*

When reflecting on their time studying at further education, the interview respondents revealed a number of factors that they perceived as dominant 'enablers' to their transitions, notably both lecturers and programme academic tutors (PATs) created a space to discuss and deconstruct the academic culture and expectations found at higher education - that is 'demystifying higher education'. In other words, staff within the Education and Social Care Faculty were introducing interventions that aimed to provide their students with important insights with respects to studying at higher education – life as a university student.

The evidence (from individual interviews and focus groups) suggests this demystifying process was sufficiently comprehensive to provide students with a realistic conceptual template on what it would be like studying at higher education. Moreover, and significantly, it was also revealed that these demystifying discussions – which occurred towards the end of their further education studies - unpacked how higher education life diverged from studying at further education. Among the differences noted was: the expectation that students studying at higher education would read more widely and more deeply; that assignments would be longer and require evidence of high levels of analytical thinking and the requirement of more independent learning; and, significantly, that higher education gave more autonomy to students. An insight into this demystification process can be detected in the following extract (Student interview 7):

> At university you have to be more focused, more organised and much more engaged. […] you have to be much more motivated and committed to survive. […]. At NC [studying at FE] we did talked with our tutors and PAT [as a class] about studying at university, how it would be compared to our NC course. So it was good to discuss all

that before starting uni [university study].  I did get a good intro [duction] on things, university life I mean, before I started.

What we are observing here are collaborative efforts by lecturing staff and PATs to both inform and manipulate student future expectations. The students are being helped to negotiate any potential disjuncture between expectations and actual experiences encountered when they study at higher education. The students are presented (while studying in further education) with a glimpse of a future academic trajectory - the next stage of their educational trajectory. The main messages projected are that academic life at higher education will be bound and patterned by certain customs and rules: there are sanctioned expectations, conventions or norms to which higher education students, as social and academic actors fulfilling a set of roles within a network of social relationships, are subject. Here students have to enact certain roles, display certain mind-sets, values and habits. More insights into this demystification enabler can be detected in the following extract (Lecturer/tutor staff, interview 3):

At FE the focus on ensuring students are familiar with a […] body of knowledge. HE students have to use information differently. [They] have to structure their ideas and knowledge to make a convincing arguments. It demands much higher levels of engagement and lots of self-directed learning. They have to accept and reject, justify and make choices. This has to be demonstrated in their assignments, the writing, the essays and presentations. It's completely different game [with] different rules and it's important to get these fundamental differences [between FE and HE] across. Getting that message across, the differences [between FE and HE] while the students are actually still in FE means there is no major cultural shocks.

The above extract suggests a form of enculturation process taking place, one that aims to  change perceptions: a  learning of the dynamics of a higher education culture, its practices, values, norms and foster, what Wingate (2007) characterises as, particular 'personal epistemological beliefs' about what it means to study and learn at university.  Wingate (2007: 395) argues that personal epistemologies have a profound impact on a student's capacity to successfully transition into university and  adopts a somewhat liberal definition of personal epistemologies: conflating beliefs about the nature of knowledge with beliefs about the nature of learning. Developing and contextualizing such personal epistemologies she contends that students in higher education need to understand their role as active and self-reflective learners: 'understanding 'learning' and becoming an independent-learner' and 'understanding 'knowledge' and becoming competent in constructing knowledge within a discipline' (Wingate 2007: 394). In other words, students entering into higher education need to readily develop (and update throughout their studies) conceptual, procedural and dispositional capacities to engage with and reflect on the processes of learning and how they construct knowledge: to gain the necessary skill-sets to select, synthesise and construct knowledge with respects to the rules and traditions of the chosen subject discipline.

The interviews with lecturing staff and PATs revealed that this higher education demystification process had a dual purpose. Firstly, to reduce the likelihood of conflicts forming between expectations and reality' by making students aware of the expectations placed upon them that are different from their previous

educational experience. Secondly, to cultivate certain aspirations and understandings. The process attempts to open up progressive educational pathways where the interweaving of learner autonomy and independent learning, self-reflection, critical thinking and knowledge construction are at play. It is also crucial to recognise that the above extracts are tracing, with hindsight, a path that is logical to the lecturers and PATs because they uniquely teach both further education and higher education and as such have intimate knowledge of the topography of these different educational terrains.

*Peer support*

The data indicated that 'peer support' – essentially a form of collaborative learning taking place in small groups outside the formal timetabling - was perceived by the students as instrumental in triggering and sustaining their social integration and academic integration. Evidence suggests that these informal student driven peer support arrangements seemed to allow collaborative engagement in pursuing learning goals to take root. Moreover, and significantly, students indicated that working with their peers in small groups - outside formal teaching – preserved their sense of emotional wellbeing. These peer groups also helped shape their identity as higher education students: giving them confidence and resilience as well as helping them be academically productive and successful during the first year. A representative view on the significance of peer support can be found in an extract from student interview respondent (Student interview 2):

> I'm in a really close study group, we support each other really well in the classroom and outside in the library too - where we meet up a few times a week. It's good situation to be in, I don't feel isolated with my studies. […]  A lot of us have been in the same class studying FE before so we been friends for a while now and that helps a lot.

Peer support groups can be both a theatre for sense making – working out educational goals and strategies - and a playground where individual subjective identities will be negotiating and reforming, in order to gain acceptance by the group, and by extension, fit into the institutional culture. The process serves to define the individual not only to others (fellow students and friends) but it also helps the individual to reflect on the 'self' – their own self-image in response to the changing educational setting surrounding them. It requires self-reflection, to resolve any conflicts and then to reconstruct the self as a coherent whole. Naturally, within the peer group there will be levels of intersubjectivity at play. Subjectivity is seen here as the constituents of an individual's sense of self, his or her identity informed and moulded by experience, and perception; the relationship between the individual's sense of self and the cultural social and structural dynamics that shape and constitute that sense. Intersubjectivity within this study refers to relationships between individuals within the peer groups. This intersubjectivity dynamic - being played out - can also shape, reinforce and refract an individual's subjectivity – their sense of being part of a group, and belonging to an educational community and institution.

The potential benefits of any peer support arrangement depends upon its capacity to both constitute and mobilise those values and dynamics that foster social integration and academic integration. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the study found that the social relationships and bonds within these peer groups shifted in the early weeks of the first year, and as time passed, they eventually crystallise and become more permanent. Interestingly, the interview data suggests that the library was seen as an important space or hub to foster a sense of belonging to an academic community. In this respects the library was an important ecosystem for both study and community engagement.

## Pastoral Care

In exploring the lived experiences and subjectivities of transitioning students, we were interested in 'what's happening?' and 'how do you feel about it? The interview responses provided insights into identity formations and their relationship to academic and social forces. Understood in this way, student identity within the context of education is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'. This conceptualisation underscores how student transitions are very much a negotiating activity, involving the capacity of the individual to engage with, make sense of and crucially, assimilate educational change. The study found that a student's identities - throughout their transition journey - was maturing. They were growing more aware of and connected to the institutional discourse. This was more than being increasingly 'streetwise'. The extract below highlights identity formation resonating with intellectual dynamics (Student interview 7):

> I feel very committed and engaged with studies. [..] This year […] I've changed academically I mean, I feel my investigative skills and study skills and writing has improved. […] I'm certainly more research active and more connected to the subjects. I've become a bit more scholarly and academic now.

The study found that this maturing reveals the onset of what we can be described as self-critical reflection where students feel able to step back and examine their own assumptions that govern their thinking and actions. The students highlighted positive interaction with lecturers and PATs as fundamental to their shifting identity formation. The interview data and focus groups indicate that both the pastoral care and peer support helped to enhance the student's self-efficacy beliefs - characterised here as the students' appraisals of their capabilities to co-ordinate a course of action required to attain designated goals and performances (Linnenbrink and Pintrich; 2003: 120). Insights on student reflection and self-appraisal is clear in the following extract (Interview student 11)

> I definitely see my life developing in a positive way. I'm getting good grades. […]. I feel am in a good place right now. […]. I just feel better connect to social sciences and humanities and being at university. I meet up with my PAT regularly and it's all good. I get positive vibs [feelings] and good support from her. […]. I read a lot more and feel more bookish. […] my writing style has improved a lot too, and it's getting more academic in style. […].

As individuals we are discursively creating, maintaining and revising a set of narratives to portray our own lives, our progress and position in the world. Moreover, we use a range of resources, media images and role models as

conceptual references points, to think through our sense of self. Education can be an important resource and reference point, a symbolic marker indicating a level of intellectual competency and knowledge (Kaufman and Feldman, 2004: 470). As detected in the extracts above, the students are not simply passive consumers of the education experience. There is a clear indication of the dialectics between the academic experience and the individual sense of change. The first year of higher education is clearly a transitional space where identities are negotiated and reworked. For many students, the educational setting expands the boundaries of their local existence, offering them new conceptual tools and ways to grasp and process their experiences. The educational setting (especially settings such as Social Sciences and Humanities) allows students to not only see the world from different perspectives but critically, allows the student to shape their sense of self in the world. The interviews suggest two dynamics of identity formation. One identity is 'state of being', which offers a sense of unity, commonality and belonging to a class and academic community or population. The other relates to 'identity as a state of becoming' which emphasises instead, the way in which student identity formation is dynamic, relativistic and context–specific: it is interacting and being shaped by social and cultural forces, and subject to continuous transformation.

From the extracts above we can get a sense of how the student's sense of self is being fashioned as they journey along, interacting with the academic subject, the curriculum and fellow students. The students emphasized certain changes and achievements. They see their first year experience as largely responsible for making traits and dispositions such as: 'scholarly and academic'' and 'self-directed and focused' as increasingly prominent in their sense of identity formation. This suggests a powerful, and generally positive interaction between the individual and the academic and social setting.

*Perceived Challenges*

With respect to the question: 'what do students perceive as the key challenges progressing from further education to the first year of university study? Students made reference to a shift from their previous environment in further education (where learning was closely structured, planned, monitored and evaluated by their tutors) to a higher education environment where the accent is on the development of autonomous behavior. It is here where we see personal epistemologies forming that are responding to, and being shaped by, the higher education experience. However, against the background of what we earlier termed as 'demystifying higher education' this shift was not perceived by the students as a major cultural shock. Nevertheless, the data gathering (from both individual interviews and focus groups) did provide some information on perceived challenges which could have the potential to hinder progress into and throughout the first year of higher education, especially if the students were insufficiently supported. The study revealed that 'time management' (to achieve the necessary academic reading for the theoretical underpinning for assignments and essays) and 'essay structuring' were seen as challenging. Other aspects perceived to be a challenge for students included higher order cognitive skills such as critical thinking and analytical skills.

**CONCLUSION**

The study has argued that transitions within the realm of education are complex, involving the converging and intersecting of a range of non-linear social systems and processes such as the circumstances of time and place, the individual subjectivity, agency and interaction with others (such as lecturers and peers). Yet, although the points of genesis and patterns of development in research on student transitions will vary from study to study, we can detect certain recurring ideas and concepts that are helpful in framing and advancing our understandings within the context of this study. For example, transitional change, conceptualised through a metaphor of a 'journey' is particularly useful because it creates the notion that the different sectors of education have different landscapes with different topographies. Within this study, the notion of educational landscapes with respective topographies helps to both contextualise and conceptualise the interview respondents' reflections on transitioning from further to higher education, while this interview data reveals different academic demands associated with each of the sectors.

The journey metaphor can be instructive because it invokes the image of the individual responding to, and in turn being and shaped by the journey experience. During the transitional journey the student must be: organised, resourceful and operate as an autonomous individual. At the same time they must be part of a community of fellow students who are reacting to emerging institutional signposts, enhancing and acquiring new capabilities in order to overcome the academic challenges and finding a sense of belonging. The transitional journey metaphor is an effective a way of apprehending the dual processes of 'being' and 'becoming' a student within a particular educational landscape.

Some commentators have sought to unpack and frame the complexity by advancing certain fine grained concepts such as the unique biographical disposition of the student (with their differing prior-experiences and expectations), or the engagement with the actual 'educational setting' (with its rules regulations and discourses, each comprising different characteristics and levels of complexity). Gale and Parker (2014: 737), characterise student transitions as 'the capability to navigate change' involving two dynamics: the 'inner self' and the 'external environment'. Within this framing the student transitions encapsulate navigating multiple processes, both linear and fluid. Another nuanced depiction, foregrounding the individual dispositions are found with the 'liminal state' of Cuconato and Walther (2015: 291) - an in-between state, between two educational identities where successful transitions requires the student to jettison previous thinking about learning (shaped by previous educational experiences) and embrace new thinking and adopt new practice and habits that correspond with the new educational setting. Coupled to the notion of 'liminality' the transitional journey is a time in which, one's sense of identity dissolves to some extent and where the sedimentations of the past knowledges and understandings, developed during earlier educational journeys and experiences, can be displaced and overwritten, creating different levels of uncertainty and anxiety.

Perhaps one of the insightful understandings comes from the notion of students' personal epistemological beliefs' which conflates beliefs about 'knowledge and knowing' with beliefs about 'learning' within different contexts. Wingate (2007: 395)

argues that, to learn effectively at university students need to be "active thinkers about the education they encounter and not simply passive recipients of education." They need to develop capacities to engage with and reflect on the processes of learning (learn how to learn) and develop the necessary intellectual capacities to construct knowledge with respects to the rules and traditions of the chosen subject discipline.

The above theoretical underpinnings and conceptualisations provide a useful backdrop to locate and understand the three transitions enablers identified in this study within a broader web of significance. In particular, Wingate's notion of 'personal epistemological beliefs' provides a helpful framing for the 'higher education 'demystification' enabler. Similarly, Wilcox *et al*. (2005: 707) concepts of 'social integration' and 'academic integration' helps understand and frame the student-centred 'peer support' and 'pastoral care' enablers.

The study offers certain themes and starting points for larger-scale studies on student transitions and progression pathways from further education to higher education. On the question of conducting further explorations on how student transitions within both further and higher education are conceptualised, resourced and engaged with, we would argue that the 'higher education demystification' enabler set, within the broader theoretical context of student personal epistemology beliefs, merits further more in-depth exploration. This area raises interesting questions about educational processes in time and place. It also helps attend to the interplay between individual beliefs and the particular and varying features of educational setting and patterns of change. This study has shown that successful transitions from further education to higher education is predicated upon a highly nuanced understanding of the complex learning journey.

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