

CRITICAL MOMENTS IN THE FIRST YEAR

Towards a framework for effective transition.



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Foreword

I am delighted to introduce to you this suite of transition and retention guides which have been produced under the National HE STEM Programme.

While increasing the supply of students to STEM Higher Education is important, ensuring that they experience a smooth transition to university and that as many as possible complete their studies successfully is of equal importance. There is a wealth of initiatives in this area that have reported on effective practice to help achieve this. The purpose of the guides is to collect and present effective practice models specifically from STEM departments. An important feature of this suite is the student perspective, which the authors have emphasised.

The issues related to induction, transition and retention are multi-faceted and therefore may have been addressed in slightly different ways in the different guides to take account of the specific context.

The suite consists of eight guides:

- Using data: an evidence-based approach to improving transition, induction and retention

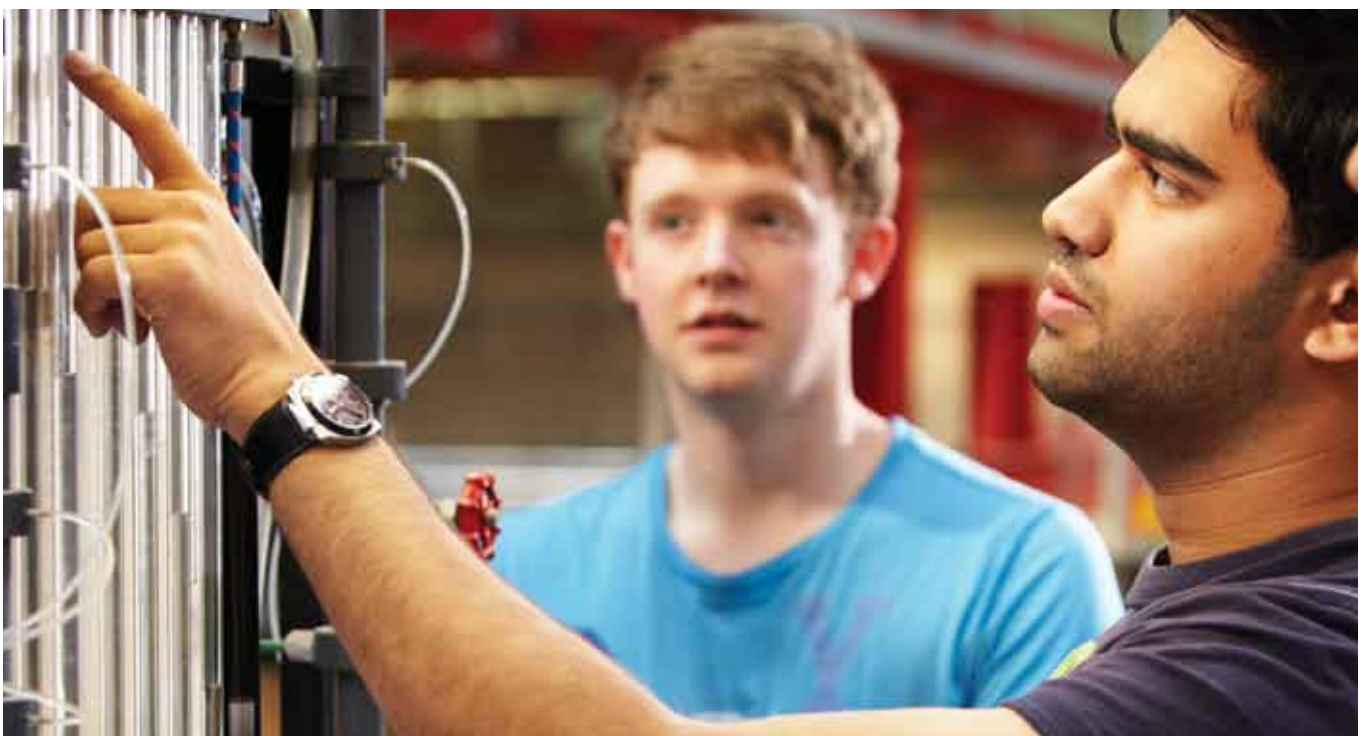
- Happy landings – an introductory guide for students considering studying a STEM subject in Higher education
- STEMming the doubts – enhanced transition and induction to HE programmes
- Critical moments in the first year at university – towards a framework for effective transition
- Promoting social engagement: Improving STEM student transition, retention and success in higher education
- Improving retention: the curriculum development perspective
- Setting up a Maths Support Centre.
- Optimising the part-time experience

My thanks go to the authors of the guides for distilling their knowledge and expertise and to the Steering Group for their valuable guidance. The group consisted of Professor Liz Thomas, Director for Widening Participation Research Centre (Edge Hill University), Hal Igarashi, Project Director Employer Engagement (Royal

Academy of Engineering), Henriette Harnisch, Director of Academies and Trusts (University of Wolverhampton), Fiona Lamb, Associate Director (Engineering Education Centre), Ed Stevens, Regional Officer for Widening Participation and Outreach (South West) and Sadaf Alvi, Regional Officer for Higher Level Skills (Midlands and East HE STEM Anglia regional spoke).

Our collective hope is that the wealth of case studies and the student perspective presented will stimulate colleagues to consider improvements to the transition processes where they find it appropriate for their institution.

Professor Kamel Hawwash
Regional Director
National HE STEM Programme
(Midlands and East Anglia)



Introduction

This guide focuses on ‘social engagement’- that is, the interactions between students and their peers and between staff and students – and the very important contribution this makes to the student experience, and thereby to retention and success.

Transition into Higher Education is a challenge for both the sector that comes before, the discharging sector, and the Higher education sector itself, as the receiving sector. This is as true in the STEM arena as it is in other disciplines and curriculum areas. Much work has been done to tackle the issue of transition and the related one of a successful first year experience, both leading to improved retention and ultimately better outcomes for students.

This guide draws on the existing literature and ties together examples of good practice into a framework for transition. In addition, focus group interviews were conducted with both 6th form students and first year undergraduates in order to test out some of the ideas for the framework. Good practice was identified through a variety of sources, including discussions with regional partners and beyond.

Who should read this guide?

What this guide presents then is a Framework for Transition, based on the six factors identified by Yorke (2008) as leading to non-progression. The framework is rooted in practice and offers a host of practical and replicable ideas. What is unique about the approach taken here is that the Framework for Transition firmly brings together the pre-entry sector with the HE sector in terms of jointly developed and carefully mapped approaches. It is aimed, therefore, at practitioners in both pre-entry and Higher education sectors, but can be used as a standalone resource by either.

Good practice project background

There is considerable research evidence about strategies employed by Higher education providers in the context of the first year experience, that enhance transition and retention in higher education. This is against a background of extensive literature identifying those factors that lead to non-progression and non-completion, taking on board guidance from a vast body of evidence. Whilst we do not claim to have conducted anything like a systematic literature review, we wanted nonetheless to contextualise the framework in the key literature. For the purpose of this report we have, therefore, drawn on the wider literature in this field, as well as conducting our own primary research.

For the primary research we focused on two groups of learners: students in their final year of key stage 5 and those in their first year of undergraduate study. The purpose of the primary research was to identify pinch points in the transition to university and in the first year from the students' point of view, with a particular emphasis on STEM subjects. This allowed us to evaluate conceptual models in the field against very specific primary findings.



The research context

Student retention is important for a variety of reasons. As Yorke and Longden (2004) observe, all governments invest in higher education to some degree or another and thus expect to see some return from their investment. Therefore, it is important on a national level for those students who are admitted to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to stay the course and succeed in their subsequent chosen careers.

Indeed, the benefits of student retention detailed in the National Audit Office report (NAO, 2007) centre on the fiscal advantages to the stakeholders involved (student/graduate, HEI, economy). And, although it does acknowledge that some students who do not complete their tertiary studies may benefit in some way from the experience, the emphasis on the definition of 'success' is associated with course completion, degree acquisition and progression to a well paid career.

Criticality of the first twelve months in HE

Much of the literature on student retention focuses on the importance of the transitional first year experience at Higher education institutions in relation to students' persistence in remaining in higher education (Tinto, 1993; Blythman and Orr, 2002). This is the stage where students face a massive change in their lives: some have left home for the first time and have the resultant fiscal lessons to be learnt as a result of financial independence; they have concerns about social integration into a new and often large community; and they have to adapt to a learning style which is very different from their pre-entry experiences. As a result, some students can find it hard to adapt to their new lifestyle and, ultimately, may leave their course.

However, when considering the issue of first generation access to Higher education, Thomas and Quinn (2006) contend that transition is a naturally occurring state that all of us encounter as an on-going process throughout our lives. That being so, it is natural to change our minds and alter course as we deem necessary. Therefore, poor retention need not necessarily be the negative performance indicator that the government has, in the past, deemed it to be (Quinn et al, 2005). Indeed, if we consider the aims and aspirations for our students in terms of academic skills acquisition (to be further examined later in this review), one could argue that students who do not complete the course have succeeded in being able to: reflectively consider their situation; carry out research to re-position themselves to suit their changing needs; and have the confidence to make that change (Quinn et al, 2005).

Probably, the most prominent (although not necessarily the most important) pinch point in terms of student retention is what Johnston (2010) refers to as the '[F]irst Year Experience (FYE).' He further identifies that HEIs need to consider the FYE in terms of the ways that students adapt and change in response to their new lifestyle within the specific areas of academic, social and cultural transition. We suggest that these transitional responses later manifest themselves as the key areas for concern in terms of the retention and progression of students. According to the NAO report (2007) into student retention, the reasons for students leaving higher education can be broadly assimilated into three main categories:

- 1) Personal issues (found to be the most common reason).
- 2) Institution/course related issues.
- 3) Financial issues.

The report further identifies that there are complications involved when considering student retention as there is 'rarely one single reason why a student gives up their course.'

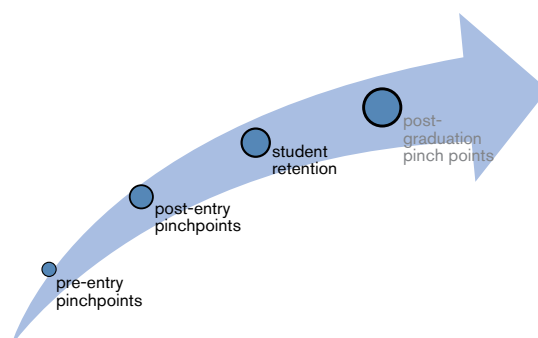
This categorisation of reasons for early withdrawal is far more complicated than one or two sub-headings. Research carried out by Yorke (1999) lists 39 different reasons (as identified by full-time or sandwich students who had left higher education) for the early departure of participants. Yorke further condenses this list into six categories of concern (not expressed in any prioritised order):

- 1) Poor quality of student experience
- 2) Inability to cope with the demands of the programme
- 3) Unhappiness with the social environment
- 4) Wrong choice of programme
- 5) Matters related to financial need
- 6) Dissatisfaction with matters of institutional provision

A series of critical moments, or pinch points, occurs in a student's journey into and through HE. Many researchers identify these critical junctures as taking place either pre- or post-entry to Higher education. It seems that the relationship between these moments is such that any framework for successful transition needs to take close account of those linkages. Indeed, we suggest that it is the linking of pre- and post-entry pinch points that makes for effective transition.

The latest proposal from the UK government in terms of involving Higher education providers in the design of A level qualifications, whilst greeted with considerable reluctance from the professionals in both school and college and higher education sectors, seems to acknowledge the intrinsic link between cross-sectorial collaboration and student success.

The diagram below highlights this finding in terms of the continued journey students are on at the point of transition into HE and while at university.



The student perspective

Returning to Yorke's six categories, we tested out reasons for non-completion or non-retention, as well as non-progression with two focus groups, as well as some one-to-one, semi structured interviews based on these categories. By elucidating students' views we were able to identify sub-pinch points which reduce what might otherwise be an almost intractable and all-encompassing topic, that of transition, to manageable items. These are then addressed through the transition framework in terms of effective transition leading to improved retention.

The 6th Form students chosen for the research were identified as being particularly active in promoting STEM opportunities. This was considered significant not only because of the interest of the funders of this project, but also as there are some worrying statistics available with regards to retention in STEM subjects. Quoting figures from the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA), a report by the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) concludes that the highest non-continuation rates by subject group (for both mature and young entrants) occur within mathematical sciences, computer sciences, engineering and technology.

The participating schools have advanced engineering departments and are extremely active in encouraging their students towards STEM-based careers. The students who participated in the research were chosen at random.

During the focus groups, students were encouraged to speak openly, and leading questions were avoided to prevent biasing and skewing of results. Sixth formers continuing on to university were asked to complete a small number of questions about what they think university will be like and their general expectations of the experience.

Evidence collected from the sixth form students' discussions raises a number of issues. Many of these can be related to Yorke and Longden's factors. When the students were asked about what was important when choosing a Higher education course, many ranked cost as being the most important factor in their decision. This suggests that students would choose a Higher education provider ranked lower for the course they wish to study if the course costs were cheaper. This may lead to being dissatisfied with resources or learning experiences and, hence, to withdrawal from university.

'My biggest concern is choosing the right course, because there are so many to choose from and getting it wrong will be expensive'

All of the students spoken to during this research were studying at least one STEM subject at level three. A majority reported that no close relatives had studied a STEM subject past a basic level. This suggests that the school and organisations such as STEMNET (a national network

that seeks to promote awareness and understanding of STEM study and career options to school aged learners), are effectively communicating the importance of STEM subjects to students before they make their option choices for a level three course. It was noteworthy that many of the students study entirely STEM-based subjects, which might stand them in good stead for studying such a subject in higher education. Some concerns resulting from that, however, would be that such a narrow choice might not create rounded individuals capable of looking at problems from differing perspectives. This may lead to students who are extremely capable of solving STEM problems but would find other aspects of HE work more challenging.

When students were questioned about the deciding factors in choosing a course to study, the results were inconsistent. Even so, the factors highlighted by Yorke and Longden were in evidence, with all the students selecting at least one of the factors when a multiple choice question was posed. The results were, however, erratic, and no key determining factor could be identified as to what was most important when choosing a course.



'I'm not too bothered, as such, about debt as long as I choose the right course'

When students were asked the question about important factors when choosing a university, however, patterns could be discerned, approximately two thirds identifying cost as being their deciding factor. A study conducted by the Scottish government into students' views on debt and fees, for example, concluded that over 60% of students surveyed maintained that they would not have gone to university if funding had not been available (Higher and Further Education Students' Income, Expenditure and Debt in Scotland 2007-08).

'The cost (of the course) is a really important factor for me when choosing a university, as I don't want to leave with too much debt'

'I think going to university is a fantastic experience for developing life skills and have always wanted to go, but the higher fees are a significant drawback to all the benefits university life gives'



In the interviews it became clear that the students had general concerns and apprehensions about the transfer to university. Despite a wide range of prompts, however, they found it very difficult to articulate these apprehensions more specifically. This finding in itself is revealing: the lack of drive and an ambiguous sense of direction on completing their key stage 5 studies appear to point towards some potential pinch points in HE. We will return to this when we discuss strategies for defining and managing expectations.

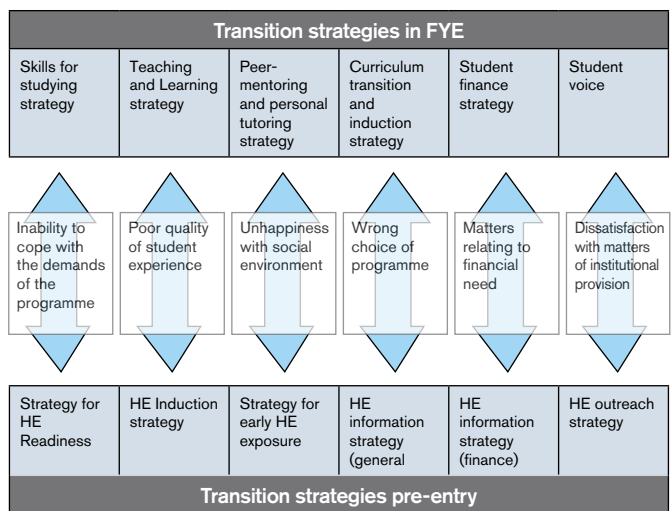
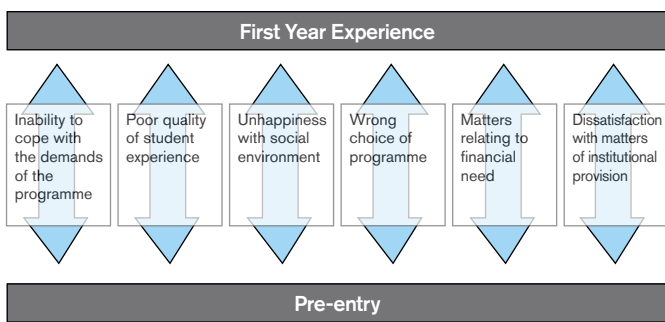
'I assume it's just like college, but harder?'

'I'll need to be more independent which I guess means less support with my studies.'

In juxtaposing the findings from the literature review and the interviews with the focus groups, it became apparent that the link between students' expectations and their reasons for non-progression or non-completion was much closer than we had expected. The themes were identical, yet the strategies employed appeared to be sector specific. If a prospective student, for example, was unsure about his or her expectations for a particular course, the strategies employed by a university were not necessarily addressing those concerns when limited to information giving alone.

Increasingly, though, universities are employing more curriculum-specific guidance, which is much better designed to alleviate prospective students' concerns and uncertainties. For example, the Stepping Stones 2HE programme (Keenan, 2008) communicates not only generic information on student finance, say, or 'life at university', but includes specific course related information for students. By including a specific transition task, particularly for STEM related subjects, they ensure that the student gets an opportunity to undertake a specific piece of work in the chosen area of study.

A transition framework



Building on the conceptual model, in turn based on Yorke's six most common reasons for non-progression and non-completion (see diagram above), the following section seeks to build a framework of practical and replicable activities.

It is critical to interpret the conceptual model as one that is fundamentally two-way and reciprocal. From the analysis of best practice examples, as well as interviews with students, we know that many institutions, both pre-entry and HE, have some transition activities embedded in their 6th Form/post-16 and FYE areas respectively.

Cross-sectorial interaction, joint planning and collaborative delivery, however, appear to be less frequently the case. Rather, Higher education institutions see themselves as the receiving institutions, called upon to deal with deficits, perceived or otherwise, of incoming students.

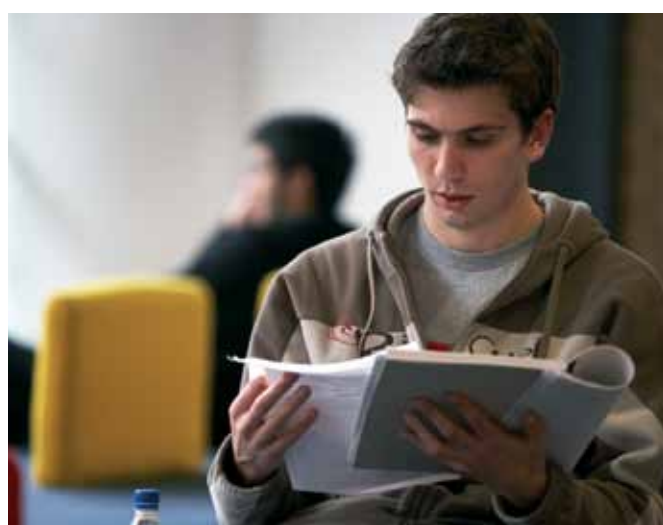
Pre-entry institutions, on the other hand, see themselves as the dispatching sector, preparing students for the transition to HE as best they can, based on information provided by HEIs or intermediary agencies, such as UCAS or the student finance company.

The framework here is designed to address the disconnect between the sectors by providing practical strategies to support students prior to coming to Higher education institutions and in their first year of undergraduate study. And, whilst the framework below is not intended to prescribe the design and implementation of a raft of strategies, it is important to highlight the strategic nature of this work and the need to embed it into institutional strategy across both sectors. The diagram below provides a link between pre-entry and transition strategies that relate to Yorke's six common reasons for non-progression and non-completion.



Application of the Transition Framework

The applications of the transition framework are not intended to be a complete list by any stretch of the imagination. Rather they are meant to illustrate an approach based on practical activities that can be adapted, replicated or expanded in almost any context. To increase effectiveness of the approach, tasks should be jointly undertaken across the sectorial boundaries wherever possible. The diagram below highlights some practical approaches that link in with Yorke's findings and provide possible solutions at both the pre-entry and first year experience stages.



Reason for con-progression/ completion	Pre-entry solutions		FYE solutions
Inability to cope with the demands of the programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Curriculum specific transition tasks ■ Teacher focus groups ■ Skills workshops ■ Pre-entry access to university resources 	↔	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Study skills support ■ Transition tasks mapped into L4 EPQ
Poor quality of student experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ HE induction at 6th Form 	↔	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Teaching and Learning strategy informed by pre-entry information ■ Teacher/lecturer focus groups
Unhappiness with social environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Residential summer schools ■ Undergraduate peer mentoring schemes 	↔	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Peer-mentoring schemes ■ Effective personal tutor systems
Wrong choice of programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Detailed information (KIS) 	↔	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Curriculum specific transition tasks and induction programme ■ Personalised retention strategies
Matters relating to financial need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Finance information ■ Open days/finance talks 	↔	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Bursaries/National Scholarship Scheme ■ Achievement scholarships
Dissatisfaction with matters of institutional provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Uni visits ■ Guru lectures 	↔	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Institutional satisfaction surveys

Illustrative examples from the framework

Factor 1: Inability to cope with the demands of the programme

Strategy: Pre-entry access to university learning resources

The University of Wolverhampton created a scheme that provides access to university learning resources for key stage 5 learners, often in conjunction with programmes such as university skills workshops or guest lectures. Schools are charged a small notional fee to cover admin costs.

- The Junior Associate Student (JAS) status provides access to the University's online learning resources on a similar basis to university students
- Application is by means of a simple online form. Once this is completed, applications are approved. Students are then sent an email with a link directing them to register for a University IT account. Once they have done this, registration is complete.
- JAS is made available for the period of an academic year
- The process was set up largely to support students engaging in programmes of study with us and would benefit from access to resources as part of this (eg, Extended Project Qualification and academic skills sessions).
- It is recommended that all schools who engage do participate in at least an introduction to using the resources and a session on Finding and Using Information, to ensure that resources are used correctly and to their maximum benefit.
- Where possible, members of school staff should be briefed in order to adequately support the students.
- Participating schools should be aware that we will ask for student and staff feedback about the use of resources, to identify where they may be useful to the curriculum, any problems encountered and any additional support required.

Factor 2: Poor quality of student experience

Strategy: Teaching and Learning Strategy informed by pre-entry experience

The University of Wolverhampton's Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) Critical interventions for enhanced learning contained a strand on pre-entry with the explicit aim of feeding the pre-entry students' experience into the articulation of different strands of the Teaching and Learning Strategy. A critical writing module, for example, which was widely subscribed to amongst first year students from a range of disciplines, was adopted in a variety of 6th forms. The purpose of that was to introduce a university-level experience pre-entry in order to prepare students to benefit as much as possible from the university experience.

Factor 3: Unhappy with social environment

Strategy: Peer-mentoring schemes

Aston University operates peer mentoring schemes at all levels.

A pre-entry scheme which is open to students who have been accepted by Aston, before they begin their university studies, tackles transition issues prior to students arriving. The details below refer to the Transition scheme aimed at first year under-graduates, which provides a focus for the early days of a university course.

As a new student, you might be new to the city, living away from home for the first time or returning to education as a mature student.

Having the support of a second year student, who remembers what it was like for them only a year ago, can help new students to settle in quickly and make the most of their time here.



Transition mentors provide their mentees with support on:

- Making friends and getting involved with student societies
- Finding services on campus
- Getting to grips with University processes
- Dealing with the 'culture shock' of a new environment
- Shopping and budgeting
- Finding out about transport and getting about
- Finding things to do and places of interest in the city
- Achieving a good life/study balance
- Coursework, module choices or exams and revision.¹

Factor 4: Wrong choice of programme

Strategy: Stepping Stones 2HE programme

The Stepping Stones 2HE programme (Keenan, 2008) is aimed at students who have been sent an unconditional offer. In addition to the generically available information, students are invited to complete tasks in the period prior to starting at university. The curriculum-specific task is tailored to the course the student is applying for and gives, therefore, much more of a bespoke impression of what to expect. Introducing students to this level of detail is likely to alleviate concerns about wrong programme choices at least to some extent.

Factor 5: Matters relating to financial need

Strategy: Talking finance

Many universities have increased their focus on communicating the implications of studying at university, especially in the context of the new fees regime coming into play from September 2012. Schools and colleges invite universities for finance talks and presentations designed to dispel any myths and preconceptions students may have about coming financial commitments and to outline the help available through the National Scholarship Scheme and other institution-based provision. The introduction of the KIS (Key Information Sets) from 2012 will provide further impetus for universities to communicate clearly any financial assistance available at the institution.

Factor 6: Dissatisfaction with matters of institutional provision

Strategy: Case studies

The HERE! (Higher education retention and engagement) project (HERE, 2011) was collaboratively delivered by Bournemouth University, University of Bradford and Nottingham Trent University as part of the What Works? Programme (HE Academy, 2012). The project, jointly funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Higher Education

Funding Council for England, contains a range of case studies into different aspects of successful retention strategies.

The second case study reports back the view from tutors as to what was successful. In line with the framework above, they highlight the importance of induction and a smooth period of settling in the students. They also refer to the significance of tasks undertaken by students prior to arriving at Bournemouth University, as well as university visits in order to pre-empt dissatisfaction with institution specific factors.



¹ www1.aston.ac.uk/current-students/get-involved/mentoring/roles/pre-entry-e-mentoring-transition-mentoring/ – accessed April 2012

Proposal for the implementation of the framework

In order to capitalise on the closer links between the pre-entry institutions and the HEIs, we suggest that an additional phase be included in the application process in order to better prepare prospective students for the rigours of academic life. In addition to personal statements as part of the student application process, it may be useful to propose that all students prepare a short (500 word?) essay that is presented to the HEI to which they have chosen to apply. This essay would provide written evidence of the research carried out by the candidate and highlight his or her academic and reflective skills. This essay could be taught and supported by HEIs during the summer before students enter Year 12, thus allowing them time to really think about what they want to do. However, the work produced at this stage need not necessarily be the final essay that they submit. A short course could be designed to provide an introduction to the required skills through the provision of a contextualised and meaningful exercise.

Points to consider in the transition essay

- Is HE the right option?
- Where should they study and what are their reasons for this?
- Why should they undertake a particular course at a particular institution and how have they reached these conclusions?

Advantages of introducing the transition essay for students

- Gives them an introduction to the kind of skills that they will need to employ when (and if) they do decide to go to university.
- Gives them an introduction into university-style learning and teaching.
- Builds confidence in their own ability to think, make decisions for themselves, and produce a cogent and coherent argument in writing (Pinch point – see notes above).
- Improves their choices thereby minimising the risk of later discovering that they are at the wrong institution or on the wrong course for them – as a result may save time and money.
- Gives them ownership of, and autonomy in, their own academic career.

for the pre-entry institution

- Provision of an introduction to academic skills should raise the performance of students during their AS/A level studies, which should result in higher grades.
- Student should be more motivated and focused in their studies as they have a clearer idea of where they want to go and how they are going to get there.



for Higher education institution

- The essays provide a wealth of information that allows universities to research student reasons for the decisions that they have made.
- Allows them to evaluate course content and make amendments as necessary.
- Allows them to evaluate their promotional/informational materials and make amendments accordingly.
- Should ensure a relatively happy cohort that is motivated and focused.
- Allows lecturers to evaluate student academic skill levels and to identify students at risk of dropping out of university due to academic pressures.
- Allows a university's pastoral and academic resources to be focused on students who are more likely to complete the course.
- Entry of better prepared students ready to take on the rigours of academic requirements.

All this requires close liaison between Higher education institution staff and pre-entry teaching staff, as it is important that the teacher is not tempted to go down the 'prescriptive teaching' line. In short, this is the opportunity for students to think, act and reflect and learn independently.



Challenges and reflection

A critical pinch point comes before prospective students even begin their career in HE (or even their post-16 education in many cases). The selection of the appropriate course and institution takes place at the start of their post-16 studies when they are required, at a very early stage, to make decisions as to the course and HEI that is suitable for them. There are many issues to consider here:

- Is the student going to be able to integrate into the institution on a social and academic level?
- What does the student want to achieve by undertaking Higher education study?
- Is the course choice driven by career prospects, pure interest in the subject, or other reasons, for example, attending an institution to be close to home or to study with friends from school etc?

Remember that many students entering Higher education are still teenagers so it is reasonable to assume that they may not yet have a clear idea of where their career aspirations lie.

Conversely, it is sometimes the case that students who do have a clear idea of their pathway to a career at the start of their studies may change their minds as a result of a number of factors, both positive and negative. New experiences may steer the student in a different direction or the course does not (for whatever reason) fulfil their expectations and they seek out an alternative path.

With the Framework outlined here, and the transition proposal as a concomitant of its implementation, we believe we are providing a useful, realisable model for collaboration between the pre-entry sector and universities that will smooth the transition from 6th form to university, and help retain students in the first year (and beyond).

It is rooted in practice, informed by practitioners and replicable across a range of disciplines.



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