**Difficulties and Support in the Transition to Higher Education for Non-Traditional Students**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the difficulties and support experienced by non-traditional students during their first-year transition to a sport and exercise course at a post-1992 university. The transition to HE presents simultaneous educational, ecological and developmental changes for students and their capability to navigate changes may affect experience, satisfaction and engagement with courses. Sixteen students were interviewed twice during their first academic year. Findings indicate that students feel anxious about the transition period, with low self-efficacy surrounding their academic potential, despite still being optimistic about their learning. Social factors positively impact their progression, especially the support from peers. Relationships with both staff and peers support transition, with an effective induction praised. Student support services were praised as supportive by students. Difficulties were experienced regarding work-loading, staff availability, and a hesitancy to seek support. Recommendations are made to support post-1992 institutions’ and non-traditional entrants’ transition to Higher Education.

**Key words:**

Transition, Higher Education, Support, Difficulty, Retention, Widening Participation.

**Introduction & Theoretical Context**

Higher Education (HE) has the potential to be transformative for individuals, local communities and for the wider society (Vignoles & Murray, 2016). However, David et al. (2009) believe that if HE is going to transform lives, individuals from a wide range of backgrounds must be able to apply for and actively participate in HE. The concept of ‘widening participation’ has been prevalent for many decades now and this shift in emphasis in terms of the target demographics of widening participation has resulted in many institutions adopting contextualised admissions, namely taking students’ circumstances into account in admissions offers, a process which is often not transparent (Vignoles & Murray, 2016). Despite developments and many decades of both government rhetoric and educational policy, current evidence still suggests that in the U.K. the likelihood of applying to and participating in HE continues to vary dramatically according to family background (Boliver, 2013; Chowdry *et al*., 2013; UCAS, 2013).

Coertjens et al. (2016) states that the changes to HE as it segues from elite institutions towards mass institutions (Trow, 2006), has affected all HE institutions (HEIs), which have had to transform their working practices and recruitment policies (Scanlon *et al*., 2007). As a result, there is a visible increase in the number of students, as well as the number of HEIs and the diversity of study programmes being offered by all educational institutions. However, with more opportunities for students to enter HE, it makes the decision of choosing a HEI, or specific study programme even more complicated (Kuh *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, with the increasing competition between HEIs, they are now held more accountable for student’s success (Yorke & Longden 2004; Alexander 2000). Thus, the successful transition to HE is of practical relevance both for the individual student and for the HEI (Tinto, 2005).

Students who have benefitted from the widening participation agenda often come from what are considered non-traditional backgrounds. In the U.K., applying the term *‘non-traditional’* to students defines those who may be older than the usual 18-25 year old undergraduate (UG) demographic, and/or to describe students from black and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds, as well as those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds whose experience and knowledge of HE is limited (Rogers, 2005). Non-traditional students often progress to HE from Further Education College’s (FECs), or the workplace, with vocationally-orientated qualifications which were centred around a more practical/occupational focus, meaning the skills, expectations and experience that these students bring to HE will differ significantly from those from more traditional pathways to HE, such as A-Level entrants (Hatt & Baxter, 2003). Considering attrition is much higher amongst students from non-traditional backgrounds, coupled with their lack of economic progression upon leaving university, compared to students from what are deemed to be traditional backgrounds, we must now think beyond conventional widening participation activities that are focused on increasing the number of non-traditional entrants from more diverse backgrounds into universities, or into particular types of more selective institutions (Vignoles & Murray, 2016). Research now needs to consider how well supported students from these non-traditional backgrounds are, once they have accessed HE, to ensure they have the best possible chance for success on their chosen course, economically and in the future.

**Transition**

Before discussing transition within a certain context, it is important to understand the nature of transition itself. There are a plethora of definitions relating to transition and whilst it is important to have a clear idea of what constitutes transition, not one single definition is absolute. For example, Ecclestone et al. (2010) believe that there is no agreement on what should be labelled as a transition, with it being such a complex and diverse process. However, Anderson et al. (2012) specifically feels that a transition is an event, or non-event that impacts relationships, routines and roles and that it is perceived by the individual involved as a transition. For the purpose of this research, Gale and Parker’s (2014, Pg. 4) highly succinct and concise definition of transition will be utilised, which is “the capability to navigate change”. Utilising such a broad definition as Gale and Parker (2014) will hopefully safeguard against omitting any important information because it doesn’t fit into a specific and/or narrowed theoretical framework.

Anderson et al. (2012) suggest that during transition there is often a change in roles and new learning is required, therefore, transition provides an opportunity for growth and development, whilst also inviting uncertainty due to the uniqueness of the environment. Gill (2017; 2018) identified that due to the unknown nature of the environment, transitional periods can be fraught with anxiety. This is supported by both Anderson et al. (2012) and McSweeney (2014) findings that transitions have the potential to cause the person stress and those in transition may require specific assistance and support due to the confusion when placed in new environments and roles. However, there is not a way of identifying how much of an impact a transition will have upon a person and the extent of the anxiety is directly influenced by the environment and whether it is anticipated, coupled with the extent of an individual’s ability to cope (McSweeney, 2014). Therefore, support is required for individuals during the transition to new environments and subsequent roles. Anderson et al. (2012) and McSweeney (2014) state that role change itself and the feelings of control require specific support, with their research exploring the different types of support at educational institutions. This research paper aims to build upon previous research by focusing on support for transitioning students within a post-1992 HEI, which are often seen as the institutions that have benefitted the most from the widening of participation by providing access to the non-traditional student demographics (McCaig & Adnett, 2010).

**Transition into Higher Education**

Contextualising transition into a HE domain is simple because HEIs have a vested interest in student success (Florence & Rosser, 2018). Yorke and Longden (2004, Pg. 9) suggest “retention and completion are important for an institution, since benefit can accrue from positive public perceptions of their success levels”. The measurement of attrition and retention in post-compulsory education is not a new phenomenon, education systems place increasing emphasis on accountability to ensure economic success, and sometimes survival (McCoy & Byrne, 2017). Therefore, it is timely to explore how best to support and retain students to ensure they have the best opportunities to be successful.

Adopting Gale and Parker’s (2014, Pg. 4) definition of transition, which is ”the capability to navigate change”, we could identify any changes in a students’ role requirements, environment or study context as ‘educational transitions’, similar to that of Coertjens (2016). In research, the exploration of first year UG students focusing upon the first semester of study is popular (Wilcoxson, Cotter & Joy, 2011; Tinto, 1993) due to the higher attrition rates occurring within this phase (Florence & Rosser, 2018); negatively affecting universities retention figures, not to mention revenue. If HE can better understand this phenomenon and understand a student’s journey to university, then HEI’s may be able to better support students through this key transitional phase and reduce attrition.

The transition to HE is clearly a marked change, with Pinheiro (2004, as cited in Rhodes *et al*., 2013) suggesting that the simultaneous educational, ecological and developmental changes faced by students highlights the complexity of the transition phase. Coertjens (2016) supports Pinheiro’s (2004) notion, alluding to examples of Pinheiro’s developmental processes, stating that the change in study context, perhaps requiring a new institution, signifies educational change, whilst a new location requires ecological change, and the change in what is expected from a new role, in a new environment, requires many developmental changes; especially from students who are from non-traditional backgrounds.

Whilst the definitions and theories all denote a concept of change during the transition phase, Gale and Parker’s (2014, Pg. 4) definition suggests more conflict in the phase, with emphasis placed on the capability for coping with change. Within Gale and Parker’s (2014) research, they created a typology to describe researchers’ approach to exploring the transition phase of HE students, with three time-related dimensions described as- *‘induction’*, *‘development’* and *‘becoming’*. The first phase of transition, *‘induction’*, is seen as the initial period of change, for example the first few weeks of a new student’s course. The second phase of transition, *‘development’*, expands to describe research that focuses upon the trajectory of a student over time. The third phase of transition, *‘becoming’*, describes research focusing upon the life and ‘lived realities’ of those students transitioning. Utilising this typology, the phase and events of this research will focus upon the trajectory of students from non-traditional backgrounds over a more significant time period than the *‘induction’* phase, which has been critiqued as being too narrow (Brooman & Darwent, 2013); favouring to explore the experiences of transitioning students over the first year of their course and the support required at this critical phase of learning, akin to Gale and Parker’s (2014) *‘development phase’*.

**Educational Support and Usage in HE**

McSweeney (2014, p. 320) posits that “research indicates the positive impact of various types of support on adjustment to higher education (Ramsay *et al*., 2007) and on academic success (Lundberg *et al*., 2008)”. Despite academic support being offered throughout HE and the positive impact it can have upon success (McInnes, 2003), significant numbers of transitioning students do not take advantage of these opportunities in the first year of their course (Harvey *et al.,* 2006; Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2011). Tinto (2006) surmises that often a determining factor in first-year student attrition are students who fail to utilise support when required.

According to Penn-Edwards and Donnison (2011), “HEI’s acknowledge that student attrition is costly, particularly in relation to government and HE funding policies. For the wider public, the cost is articulated in terms of the loss of valuable material and financial resources, and for the students, it is related to their career and life chances (Harvey *et al.,* 2006; Yorke & Longden, 2004, p. 6)”. Furthermore, Jacklin and Le Riche (2009, p. 735) propose that “student support is a socially situated, complex and multifaceted concept”. Therefore, due to the societal, professional and personal impact of attrition, there is currency in all of HE to ensure that students are supported effectively and that the support provided by an institution meets the needs of their students, regardless of background. In fact, McSweeney (2014), noted a changing view of educational support, which is transitioning from a view that focused upon deficits in HE students to that of examining the resources that students find useful and supportive. It is suggested that appropriate support contributes to the developing feelings of mastery over one’s environment, in turn helping to reduce stress in students and decrease attrition (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978, cited in Rhodes *et al.*, 2002).

Sometimes the source of support can affect a student’s willingness to utilise the guidance provided by a university, for example, students can sometimes be reluctant to seek academic advice from university staff due to feelings of apprehension and appearing unknowledgeable (Gill, 2017; Thompson, 2008). These findings are contrasted by Walsh et al. (2009), where first year students identified their lecturer as the second most frequent source of assistance for academic support; with peers cited as the most frequent source of information and support. Lecturers are more frequently seen as an important source of support, regardless of their subject discipline, due to the time demands placed on students because of their multiple other responsibilities; something which may be a fairly new phenomena, exacerbated by those that have accessed HE from non-traditional backgrounds as part of the widening participation agenda. This, combined with the availability of support services at suitable times, is reported to cause difficulties in utilising other institutional support services (Tones *et al*., 2009). Thomas (2002) supports Walsh et al. (2009) findings, where social support from peers is deemed beneficial in stressful situations, such as the transition period to university, as experiences are often shared and intervene between the stressful situation and a person by reducing, or avoiding a negative stressful response.

If educational support is indeed going through a revolution (McSweeney, 2014), bespoke support, increased communication and greater sensitivity with advice and guidance will have a role to play in engaging individuals and demographics who lack the confidence, or knowledge necessary to participate, or thrive in HE. It is possible that non-traditional groups and individuals would profit greatly from further interventions to support their transition (Rhodes *et al.*, 2002).

*To summarise, the information outlined in this section highlights the multifaceted nature of transition and the diversity of experiences amongst students, whilst reinforcing the importance of exploring student transition for specific student groups within subject areas/courses and the specific construction of their experiences and worlds as they transition to HE (McSweeney, 2014). By further understanding the students, the specific difficulties faced by those students and their perceptions of how they are supported, it will invariably enable HE to provide greater more bespoke support to their students. With sport and exercise related courses being a popular subject for students within Post-1992 universities, it is important to explore this body of students and their supported transition into HE.*

*The findings of this research will hopefully allow recommendations to be formed on improving the transitional process for students studying sport and exercise related degrees at HEIs and potentially the wider student body. The recommendations will enable universities to better understand the difficulties faced by students and how to better support these students, working towards increasing student retention and satisfaction in the process.*

**Research Aim(s)**

This research utilises a framework akin to McSweeney (2014, p.318), aiming to “explore the features of the institutional environment identified by students as causing difficulties or providing support”. Adopting Gale and Parker’s (2014, Pg. 4) definition of transition, which is ”the capability to navigate change”, this paper will specifically report on institutional factors identified by non-traditional students as being supportive, or not, during the *‘development phase’* [first year] of their transition to a sport and exercise UG degree course within a post-1992 HEI.

**Method**

The methodology is underpinned by an interpretivist research paradigm to explore individual interpretations of experiences and identities from a students’ perspective. Reeves and Hedberg (2003, p.32) note that the interpretivist paradigm stresses the need to put analysis in context and that it is mostly concerned with understanding the world as it is from the subjective experiences of individuals, in this case the transitional experiences of non-traditional students. In support, Creswell (2003, p.8) believes that interpretivist research relies upon the “participants' views of the situation being studied” and is predominantly explored utilising a qualitative methodology. Consistent with Creswell’s (2003), McSweeney (2014) and Jacklin and Le Riche (2009) views, a qualitative study design was employed.

**Participants**

The participants were recruited from a cohort of first year UG students, enrolled on a course of study within a sport and exercise related discipline. A purposive sampling approach was utilised (Holt *et al*., 2012; Patton, 2002), with specific sampling criteria established a priori to recruit participants who could provide the most insightful responses to the research questions. All fifty-five first year students were invited to participate in the research, with the inclusion criteria being students over the age of eighteen, enrolled on the first year of an UG course, and residing in the local area. Eighteen students volunteered to participate in the research, with two students withdrawing from the project prior to data collection. The mean age of the participants at the commencement of the research was 21.2 years, with a standard deviation of 3.2 years.

Participants predominantly came from the local area of the post-1992 HEI, which is characterised by high levels of deprivation. The Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2019, ranked the area as the 13th most deprived local authority (out of 317) in England, with over half of areas classified among the most deprived 20% in England, and approximately one-third of areas (32%) fall in the most deprived 10% (Public Health England, 2020). Nine participants were transitioning from FEC’s, four participants from school sixth forms and three participants from employment/gaps in their education. Furthermore, eleven of the participants were male and five were female, highlighting the under-representation of women in the male-dominated industry of sport (Walker & Bopp, 2011) and its mimicry on UG sport and exercise student recruitment.

**Programme(s) of Study**

The study programmes of the participants varied between the sub-disciplines of sport and exercise. All the participants were enrolled on three-year UG degrees, with eleven participants enrolled on a Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (CIMSPA) accredited pilot course. Courses are both theoretical and practical, with assessments being based around industry standards and principles of professional practice, with occasional traditional academic methods of assessment, such as examinations. Participants attend their university course over approximately three days per week during a two-semester academic year. Core modules pertaining to academic skills and research skills are inclusive of all UG courses at the HEI, with subject specific modules scaffolding the core modules.

**Data Collection**

Consistent with Creswell (2003) and Mackenzie and Knipe’s (2006) view of an interpretivist methodology, the primary method of data collection were semi-structured individual interviews. It is believed that interviews are very useful for personal theorising, which is an important part of the overall data collection process as the researcher seeks to develop the emerging theory (Crotty, 1996; Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). Using semi-structured interviews decreases the influence of the researcher over the interview process and hence gives a more prominent role to the participants' opinion (Madriz, 2000). Having gained institutional ethical approval, all sixteen of the participants were interviewed twice during the *‘development stage’* of their transition period (Gale & Parker, 2014); initially towards the end of semester one and finally at the end of semester two. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) support the use of multiple interviews to ensure that there is depth and richness to the data collected, whilst McSweeney (2014, p.322) also supports multiple interview use in this context due to the “difficulties faced by students during the transition phase and their changing views of support throughout the academic year, thus providing a more complete picture of the participants’ experiences”. The themes discussed in the interviews were based around Jacklin and Le Riche (2009, p.740) research into student support, they centred upon “what support had students experienced; what were the most important forms of support; and how had the support been helpful, and why?” These broad themes were provided to participants upon consenting to participate. Due to the small amount of conceptual research in this area, the initial semi-structured interview questions were informed by Jacklin and Le Riche’s (2009) key themes and McSweeney’ (2014) interview questions, albeit with more emphasis placed on support and its impact on the transition to HE. Participants were asked what they enjoyed about their course, the transition to HE, difficulties encountered, sources of help and support, and the relationship between HE studies and work/life balance. The second round of semi-structured interviews utilised the same interview guide, allowing for changing views of support during their transition to HE. The cumulative duration of the interviews was 21 hours 07 minutes, averaging 41 minutes per interview. The interviews were audio-recorded to minimise any difficulties in recall when transcribing the data verbatim (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Interview Transcript Approval was offered to participants after each interview. Mero-Jaffe (2011) advocates the transfer of the transcripts back to the participants to validate the transcripts and to empower the participants by allowing them control of what was written. There were no requests from participants to withdraw any of their comments from the transcripts.

**Data Analysis**

Participants’ views on support and its impact on the transition to HE was taken at face value enabling the data to be personal to the participants, consistent with the relativist epistemology of interpretivist research, as well as the complexity of the notion of support (McSweeney, 2014; Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009). Data was examined for participants’ perceptions and interpretations of aspects of the university environment, which caused difficulty or were supportive during the transition to HE. Accordingly, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was utilised during data analysis to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world. By utilising IPA, it further emphasises Greenbank’s (2003) position that the research exercise is a dynamic process, with an active role for the researcher in that process. This two-stage interpretation process is supported by the notion that participants are trying to make sense of their world, and the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world (Smith & Osborn, 2004).

Joseph (2014) posits that this experiential approach to research explores the lived experience of the individual's perception and how individuals make sense of it in their given context. Therefore, this specific lens utilising sport and exercise UG degree students will provide a novel and focused insight into how these students perceive support provided by their institution during their ‘development phase’ transition within a post-1992 HEI.

**Findings and Discussion**

The research was conducted to explore specific institutional features identified by students from non-traditional backgrounds as being supportive, or not, during the *‘development phase’* (Gale & Parker, 2014) of their transition to HE. The findings will enable HEIs to better understand the student body and what they deem supportive, or not, during their transition to university, as well as make changes to current practices and processes to further support both their current and future student cohorts; hopefully increasing retention, reducing attrition and improving student satisfaction at the institution. In particular, the findings will be of interest to post-1992 HEIs that often deliver a wide range of courses popular with students from non-traditional backgrounds, such as sport and exercise related degree programmes.

The findings of this research are discussed within each of the subsequent sub-sections, supported by figures where appropriate to illustrate the features identified by students as causing difficulties or providing support in their transition. Whilst these figures will highlight the key findings, the quality of the data enabled in-depth phenomenological analysis to make meaning of complex and dynamic phenomena such as the transition to Higher education (Baker *et al*., 2019).

**Transitional Anxiety**

The transition to HE is an anxious time for students (Gill, 2019; Gill, 2020; Gill, 2017; Postareff *et al.*, 2017; McSweeney, 2014), with a multitude of features providing anxiety and difficulty during the non-traditional students’ transition to HE; see Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1.** Sources of anxiety for students during the transition to HE.

The subsequent discussion in this section aims to discuss the findings presented in Figure 1. Interestingly, it emerged that some students were hesitant to seek formal support from the HEI. This reinforces Thompson’s (2008) notion that students are reluctant to seek support from academic staff, preferring instead to rely on support from their peers. A student noted,

“I didn’t want to ask for help… I wanted to be able to find my own way and get stuck into my course. …although others [students] helped me find my way early on [in the transition]”

This reluctance to seek support from academic staff may in part be due to the low self-efficacy of those students new to HE. With the transition to HE perceived as difficult due to the simultaneous educational, ecological and developmental changes (Pinheiro, 2004, as cited in Rhodes *et al.*, 2013); it is evidently a turbulent time in a new environment. Unsurprisingly, students perceived their ability to cope with this new environment as low. A student noted,

“I’m realistic… this [HE] is all new to me. In all honesty, I don’t know if I will cope… am I up to the standard? Am I ready to do a degree?”

However, not all students were affected by low self-efficacy, a few of the students were very resilient in their attitudes towards learning and optimistic about learning in this new environment. The students that were optimistic about their studies also demonstrated high academic self-efficacy, which Cassidy (2015) deems to be a significant predictor of academic resilience and success amongst students. A student noted,

“I’m quite happy with the academic aspects of the course, despite what the others think. I came from a sixth form and feel that I can already do a lot of what has been asked of us so far… I’m looking forward to learning more!”

Six of the students spoke of social anxiety and its effect on their transition to HE. Social anxiety sufferers harbour pervasive fears about being negatively evaluated by others (Clark, 2001), which may be increased significantly within an educational setting, where people are constantly being assessed in formative and summative settings. Studying on a sport and exercise course may exacerbate the condition because there is a significant amount of teamwork involved due to the team-based nature of sport (Gill, 2019). Six students discussed not ‘belonging’ and feeling somewhat like outsiders. This is dispiriting considering that social anxiety is widely regarded as a key contributor to student attrition (Andrews & Harlen, 2006). Students noted,

“It has been hard [socialising]… I’m quite introverted and it takes some time to come out of my shell… Although, I am feeling more comfortable than when I first started.”

“The group are quite well knit already but I haven’t made as many friends on my course as I thought that I would… I feel that I’m outside of the group, looking in…”

A difficulty of the students’ transition phase has been the learning of academic skills; specific elements such as writing style, referencing and background reading were discussed. Thirteen students noted that academic skills in some form provided them with worry surrounding their capability for academic study. A student succinctly noted,

“I haven’t ever had to worry about academic skills before. At college I didn’t have to write in any particular way, nor did I have to reference… It has hit me pretty hard; I feel like I am playing catch-up…”

These findings are akin to Gill (2017), who identified that HE students who had transitioned from a vocational education and training background were also apprehensive about academic skills and their application. Schillings et al. (2018) research indicates that the problem could be more course related, stating that academic skills cannot be separated from subject content and the process of learning, which is the case on the students’ programme of study. Many of the students began their studies with little or no knowledge of the academic skills underpinning their subject discipline. When coupled with the fact that these principles are rarely explicitly documented by subject lecturers, who often mistakenly assume students understand what is required of them (Elton, 2010; Hunter and Tse, 2013), it is no surprise that these aspects of HE have the potential to generate anxiety.

**Teaching and Learning**

There are distinct differences in the approach that HE plan and deliver their courses and curricula compared to other areas of education (Bandias *et al.*, 2011). For this reason, it is accepted that transitioning students may notice and feel a tangible change with the academic systems employed in HE, compared to previous educational experiences (Gill, 2019; Gill, 2017; Bandias *et al.*, 2011). This phenomena may well have been evident in the findings, however, the institutional teaching and learning features that emerged from the findings were largely deemed supportive during the transition phase; see Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2.** Emerging teaching and learning features identified by students as causing difficulties or providing support during the transition to HE.

The subsequent discussion in this section aims to discuss the findings presented in Figure 2. Firstly, the students unanimously found the academic staff a valuable support mechanism during the transition phase, despite often being reluctant to seek their support. The academic staff’s experience, knowledge and understanding were found to be important in supporting the transition of the students. Students noted,

“The lecturers are where I got a lot of my information. Each week they would provide some guidance on a particular aspect of our course, or modules that seemed important.”

“If I didn’t know something, I would ask the lecturers in my modules… they would almost always be able to pass me on to somebody that could help.”

McSweeney (2014) posits when students perceive instructions from academic staff as being clear, relevant to their goals and developmental to learning, it motivates students and makes them more optimistic about their learning, thus promoting self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is an issue within environments and roles that are new to students (Gill, 2017). However, supportive academic staff may be able to off-set the effect of this somewhat with clear information, advice and guidance. Merrill (2015) asserts that the importance and significance of supportive academic staff is crucial in inspiring and motivating students, who are coming from diverse backgrounds to HE.

Another valuable feature that students found supportive were the independent learning activities set by academic staff, which were based around the conceptual theories taught in lectures, seminars and practical sessions. These supported students’ conceptualisation and application of theory to practice. Students noted,

“… I like to access materials on ‘Blackboard’ [VLE] before the lectures and seminars, so I can give them a read and research anything that I am unsure of… The activities that staff set outside of the classroom are great and provide a lot of further knowledge… which helps with my assessments.”

“Lessons don’t seem to last too long… its great that I can go home and do extra work and reading around the topics on my course. …It makes me feel more in control of my course [learning]. …I have learnt so much since I started.”

Hockings et al. (2018) states that independent learning is now a key feature of university education and being an independent learner is widely accepted in the sector as a ‘graduate attribute’ and something highly valued by industry and employers. However, practice differs widely between institutions, with the degree of structure and direction within independent learning varying from highly structured, directed independent learning to fully autonomous learning (Thomas *et al*., 2015). The students felt that academic staff played a vital role in creating opportunities for independent learning (Hockings *et al.*, 2018), which supported their transition to HE.

Students found that assessment/task feedback both in a formative and summative format was suppportive in their transition to HE. Feedback is considered an essential component of effective teaching and learning in HE (Ackerman & Gross, 2010; Carless *et al.*, 2011) and it is widely believed to be central to student learning. Students noted,

“The amount of feedback we receive is excellent. We receive feedback in different ways for class work, as well as our assignments. …I use the feedback to improve for the next time. It has really helped me since I’ve been on the course [at university]… .”

“The lecturer’s provide us with a lot of feedback for our work, …most of it is useful.”

“The lecturers comments have helped me to develop and improve this year. Sometimes their comments are verbal, but mostly written when its about assessments. If we don’t understand their comments, they [academic staff] have an open-door policy so that we can go ask for help [clarification].”

The findings contrast significantly with those of Mulliner and Tucker (2017), who report that students across HE commonly report dissatisfaction with the feedback they receive. In fact, the criterion based upon feedback quality within the National Student Survey (NSS) is consistently the least satisfactory aspect of teaching and learning within English universities (HEA, 2013). Dawson et al. (2019) assertions that institutional practice differs greatly in HE could go some way to explain the findings, especially as there is still much debate in research regarding what constitutes effective feedback from the perspetive of both staff and students.

Although students were largely positive about teaching and learning features being supportive in their transition to HE, they were critical of the lack of staff availability. The findings indicate that academic staff were often not available for large parts of the working week, with limited availability and vacant offices being a source of frustration. Students noted,

“We are encouraged to go and see lecturers when we need clarification on something, or support, but quite often they are not in their offices… it sometimes means a wasted trip into university when I could be working or completing essays”.

“… I have often wandered down the [department] corridor looking for my tutor but it is a ‘ghost town’. It is frustrating, especially when she only has a couple of slots per week, where we can book in to see her”

“Our lecturers are great, really approachable and helpful. But finding a time where we are both available is sometimes difficult.”

There are two perspectives here that could possibly explain this phenomena. Firstly many students at post-1992 universities can be described as ‘non-traditional’ entrants to HE, who have benefitted from the widening participation agenda (Gill, 2017). These students often come from diverse backgrounds and commonly juggle other responsibilities, such as families, and employment to subsidise their studies and lifestyle (Moreau & Leafwood, 2006). Therefore, limited access to academic staff can be frustrating due to contemporary students’ own time demands away from education. Secondly, Michie et al. (2010) asserts that universities now recruit a more diverse student body, therefore, the students themselves may not be traditionally suited to academic study, requiring greater amounts of support compared to traditional entrants to HE, such as A-level entrants (Hatt & Baxter, 2003). Couple this with the teaching and research responsiblities of academic staff and it may provide some epxlanation for the perceived lack of staff availability.

**Social Aspects**

Similar to the findings of other studies relating to HE (Thompson, 2008; Thompson & Mazer, 2009; Walsh *et al.*, 2009), social support and peer support in particular were reported to be positive sources of support, making students feel positive and valued. However, some social aspects appeared to make the transition more difficult at times. See Figure 3 below.

**Figure 3.** Emerging social features identified by students as causing difficulties or providing support during the transition to HE.

The subsequent discussion in this section aims to discuss the findings presented in Figure 3. Foremost, students feel valued by the academic staff and the wider university, with this developing social capital culminating in an increased social identity with the academic staff and wider university. Students noted,

“The lecturers have made me feel really comfortable, supporting me along the way. I know it is only my first year but I feel comfortable here at university.”

“I feel like I belong here at university, … I am clever enough and can meet the deadlines. Still, I know where I need to go if I need help. …The lecturers are great at pointing us in the right direction and my tutor treats me like an adult, which hasn’t been the case in the past.”

This sense of ‘belonging’ is not common for students during the transition to HE (Scanlon *et al*., 2007). Tinto’s (1988) pivotal research into student transition suggests that students first separate themselves from previous learning communities, and progress through a period of transition before being fully incorporated into the new community of the university; which is a process that takes significant time. To achieve incorporation, Tinto (1998) and Astin (1980) contend that students must be socially and academically connected to the university; suggesting that only those students who feel a connection to the university persist in their studies. It appears that being valued by academic staff and the institution itself has had a profound impact on the students, supporting their transition to HE.

The support from peers within the social environment was an important support mechanism, which students relied upon during their transition to HE. Students noted,

“If I didn’t know something, I would ask other people in my group. My friends seem to help me out with most things. I don’t necessarily need to go and ask too many questions.”

“Im good friends with [Name] and [Name], who are on the course. We work things out together, whether its what we have to do for our next lesson, our assessment, or even just to bounce ideas around. … It’s great to have other people experiencing what you are so that you’re not on your own.”

“The other people on my course have been great at helping me understand what to do and where to be.”

The friendships formed during this period were important to the students and provided a feeling of commonality amongst individuals and the group. These findings are typical of students during the transition phase to HE (McSweeney, 2014; Thompson, 2008; Thompson & Mazer, 2009; Walsh *et al*., 2009). Social support from peers is deemed beneficial in stressful situations, such as the transition period to university, as experiences are oft shared and intervene between the stressful situation and a person by reducing, or avoiding a negative stressful response (Thomas, 2002; Walsh *et al*., 2009). McSweeney (2014) suggests that the cognitive and socio-emotional support provided by peers should further influence teaching practice and strategies, encouraging greater peer collaboration and group work within course delivery.

Not all social aspects of the students experience were positive, a couple of students noted that whilst they had positive relationships with their fellow students, they felt a pressure to socialise away from the learning environment. A student noted,

“Some [students] just want to go out and get drunk but I’m not here for that. I have no problems with them but I came here to learn, I have my own group of friends at home. … I do sometimes feel pressure to go out with them.”

The transition to university often constitutes a unique period in students’ development, who in addition to enhanced personal and professional opportunities, enjoy an increase in independence, responsibilities, freedom and social opportunities (Levesque, 2011). Transitioning students may be motivated to develop a new university identity, socialising to facilitate identity exploration, to cope with identity confusion, or as part of their university identity (Riordan & Carey, 2019). This attitude can often cause conflict with other students, especially those who do not socialise away from university for their own personal reasons, should that be due to family, work or study related responsiblities. Gill (2019) suggests that this phenomena could be due to post-1992 students coming from what are deemed non-traditional backgrounds, who often have other responsbilities outside of university that take priority, or are more mature.

**Institutional Orientation**

Specific early engagement strategies focusing upon the orientation of the students to the HEI, school/faculty, and course of study were identified as features of both support and also difficulty; see Figure 4 below.

**Figure 4.** Features of institutional orientation identified by students as causing difficulties or providing support during the transition to HE.

The subsequent discussion in this section aims to discuss the findings presented in Figure 4. Typically, the induction historically represents the start of the student journey in HE (Goldring *et al*., 2018). The students’ institutional orientation encompasses a period at their post-1992 university, which is a specific induction week without lessons, where students participate in a range of activities to orientate themselves with the university, its systems, and student life in general. The students viewed this period very positively and felt that it was significant in integrating them into university. Students noted,

“I loved the ‘Welcome Week’… I got to know my way around campus, make friends, meet staff. It was a great introduction to university.”

“The induction period supported me immensely, I learned a lot about the uni, my course and the staff. We talked about expectations from both the university and from our [students] perspective. There was a lot of information.”

The findings reflected favourably upon the induction experienced by the students and mirrored Andersen et al. (2012) view of what support should look like in the induction period, with students familiar with their roles, learning about the regulations and norms, and that sufficient time was provided by their institution to orientate students so that they can understand expectations. However, Hussey and Smith (2010) feel that induction delivered at the start of the academic year is a misnomer because induction isn’t an event per se but an ongoing process. Brooman and Darwent (2014) support this notion, believing that induction can last the duration of a student’s first year at university to acclimate them to their new surroundings. Typically, new students tend to feel an information overload within the first week of term, ultimately reducing the effectiveness of a specific induction period and possibly supporting the benefits of a longer period for induction (Goldring *et al*., 2018; Brooman & Darwent, 2014). Surprisingly, the student’s perceptions weren’t negative about the information they received, aside from the overwhelming quantity. A student noted,

“There was a lot of information provided by the university [staff] in the induction period. It helped us to understand what the requirements and expectations of university were.”

The students spoke of the developing relationships between academic staff and students in the early stages of their course as something that helped support their transition to university. Students noted,

“The lecturers are great. They are the first and often only point of contact for us students… if in doubt, I ask the lecturers.”

“… I feel that I have got to know my personal tutor well. All lecturers provide guidance around our modules and the assessments. It helps to have things explained clearly. … If I didn’t have this guidance, it would have made uni much harder.”

“Generally, I speak to the other students to try and gain a better understanding of uni work. Then if I need further information, I speak to the lecturers. Students and staff have good relationships which mean that we can catch them at the end of a lecture or in their office at a later point.”

These findings appear synonymous with other educational research (McSweeney, 2014; Roberts, 2018; Walsh *et al.*, 2009). Walsh et al. (2009) findings reflected this exact phenomenon, with the students citing their academic tutor as the second most frequent source of support for academic issues and with friends on the course being the primary source of support. McSweeney (2014) believes that the accessibility of academic tutors, confidence in their ability to understand problems, and the informal nature of the relationship are key reasons why students have a proclivity to seek support from academic staff. Undergraduate courses tend to last between 2-4 years; therefore, HE provides an opportunity and environment for students to develop relationships over a period of time, which the findings largely deem supportive and developmental to transitioning effectively to HE.

A perceived difficulty when transitioning to HE was the workload in the initial period of the course. Students spoke of assessments in the first week and a very busy timetable as key reasons why this period was difficult. A student noted,

“I couldn’t believe that I had an assignment to submit at the end of my first week! I barely knew my way around the campus, or even lecturers’ names but I was expected to write an assignment. The induction week was packed out with things to do, so when could I write this? … stressful.”

The findings were synonymous with McSweeney (2014), who explored the transition of social care students to HE. The multiple responsibilities of students in the initial transition period, coupled with assessment related information caused difficulties that they did not anticipate at this stage of the course. Ecclestone (2004) cautions against early assessments believing that extended preparation for assessments is key to students understanding expectations and marking criteria. Assessments in the first couple of weeks of a course may lead to a lack of clarity in expectations, with little time for guidance to be provided (MacDonald & Stratta, 1998; Inglis & Murphy, 1999, as cited in McSweeney, 2014; Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003).

**Institutional Strategic Support**

Roksa and Silver (2019) believe that despite there being ample opportunities for students to access support within most contemporary HEIs, there is sometimes limited guidance on what support is available, which means that students rarely make use of institutional resources during their transition. However, the findings suggest students that accessed the institutions resources found them to be supportive; see Figure 5 below.

**Figure 5.** Features of institutional support identified by students as causing difficulties or providing support during the transition to HE.

The subsequent discussion in this section aims to discuss the findings presented in Figure 5.
It was apparent that students didn’t feel enough information or guidance was provided about accessing support, providing significant difficulty in their transition to HE. Students noted,

“I didn’t get told where I could access some help [support]. Instead I waited. It turned out that I accidently found where I could go for help.”

“I havent sought any support so far. … I want to see if I can do it myself, …I don’t know who I would ask for information, Blackboard?”

This viewpoint is supported by Roksa and Silver (2019), who found that despite institutional support being available, finding information on support is largely haphazard for students, and even when students are aware of specific opportunities, there is little guidance or structure for participating. Similarly to this study’s findings, students were aware that they needed assistance in their transition, however, without structure or guidance, they often failed to locate and utilise available institutional support. Therefore, it is no surprise that between 40% and 50% of first-year students do not use institutional support, such as career development services, financial advising, and academic tutoring (Kuh, 2009). If appropriate support contributes to the developing feelings of mastery over one’s environment, in turn helping to reduce stress in students and decrease attrition (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978, cited in Rhodes *et al.*, 2002), then information and guidance of support services may be required earlier, potentially as a pre-entry intervention strategy prior to students starting their course. However, the lack of students accessing institutional support is not wholly due to a lack of information and guidance. Some students were hesitant to seek institutional support. A student noted,

“I didn’t want to ask for help. I want to find my own way, …there’s so much to learn that I didn’t have time to think about it much.”

Reluctance to be seen as ‘not coping’ has been suggested as an influence on students’ decision not to seek help from support services (Clegg *et al*., 2006; Dodgson & Bolam, 2002, Heagney & Benson, 2017). Dodson and Bolam (2002) suggest students often construct their own support from their families, friends and peers. However, along with a reluctance to seek ‘formal’ support goes a determination to succeed. Therefore, if mainstream pedagogical practices incorporated support so students do not have to ask for it, many more students could access institutional support services (Clegg *et al*., 2006; Dodgson & Bolam, 2002).

Similar to Heagney and Benson (2017), students were satisfied with the institutions’ support services that they accessed, despite making limited use of the services. Five students in total sought support during their first year transition. Students noted,

“The information I received was excellent. …I was unsure about a lot of things [before seeking support], even staying at university. But they [support staff] put my mind at ease.”

“I needed help with my finances. … I was considering doing some part-time work and the uni referred me to their job shop, which provided a fantastic service by getting me some work. …there are fantastic services here for the students, they just need to know about them.”

“Do to a few things happening in my life, I needed someone to talk to about life and now university. … I went to the Student Hub and the made an appointment for me to see a counsellor.”

Broglia et al. (2017) posit that offering different modes of support is necessary to suit the diverse needs of students and that universities have an obligation to support their students from enrolment to graduation (Harris *et al*., 2015). This is particularly evident with students accessing a range of support services from the institution, specific to their needs and requirements. Some sought support with academic regulations, others for potential part-time employment opportunities, and another for a counselling referral. Whilst positivity surrounding the support provision was evident, Furedi (2013) posits that HE should not be infantilising academic life and too much support means that students may be unprepared for life beyond graduation. Whilst cynical, Harris et al. (2015, p.3) states ‘this viewpoint highlights an important point: support should be directed at increasing students’ own skills and attributes to improve their resilience and their ability to function outside the educational environment’.

**Limitations**

There are limitations that need to be considered within the research. Firstly, the potential impact of interviewer bias on data collection. The researcher and interviewer are faculty staff at the institution, therefore, the possibility of bias from students’ responses can not be discounted. Whilst the interviewer already had a rapport with most participants through delivering aspects of their curriculum as students, which facilitated the collection of rich data, it is posible that the participants could have felt under pressure to provide responses that were perceived as favourable to the researcher and their respective institution. Secondly, the study was located in one west-midlands university and relied on a small sample of 16 students, who were predominantly male (n=11) and drawn from a limited range of programmes. Whilst every effort was made to accurately define and contextualise the demographic, Gill (2019) argues that using data from a single institution may not be representative of non-traditional students as other insitutions apply this term. It is therefore acknowledged that some of the identified results may not be generalisable to the broader U.K. student population, or institutions. Tett et al. (2017) surmise that whilst we can only acknoweldge these realities as inevitable parameters to research like this, the special circumstances of the students and their views expressed over time allows great insight into our understanding of first year transitions and the transition to HE overall.

**Conclusion & Recommendations**

The research sought to explore the institutional factors identified by non-traditional students as being supportive, or not, during the *‘development phase’* [first year] of their transition to HE. The findings come from a limited sample of sixteen participants from only one post-1992 institution. However, many of the findings concur with other research conducted in HE (Gill, 2017, 2019; 2020), and interestingly other subject areas, such as social work (McSweeney, 2014) and social care education (Forrester-Jones & Hatzidimitriadou, 2006).

It is evident that the transition to university can be an anxious period for students from non-traditional backgrounds (Gill, 2019; Gill, 2020; Gill, 2017; Postareff *et al.*, 2017), providing a multitude of difficulties during this phase. Anxiety surrounding academic skills were common, largely due to the differences in the approach that HE plans and delivers their courses and curricula compared to other educational environments (Bandias *et al.*, 2011). However, a social anxiety was also prevalent, which impacted learning, affected self-efficacy of students and the ability to ask for support. It is the institutions role to minimise the impact and occurrence of anxiety surrounding academia by providing early-engagement strategies to dispel myths and educate transitioning students on expectations, institutional support services and academic skills within HE. It is important to note that despite these anxieties, students were predominantly still optimistic about their learning and positive about their experiences in HE.

The specific aspects of teaching and learning encountered by students, such as format of assessments, independent learning and academic staff were deemed supportive features in their transition to HE. In fact, the academic staff’s experience, knowledge and understanding were found to be important, providing feedback and instructions relevant to the students goals and developmental to their learning, thus motivating students and making them more optimistic about their learning (McSweeney, 2014). However good the intentions and ability of academic staff, their lack of availability was something that the students deemed difficult in their transition. Post-1992 universities have many non-traditional entrants to HE, who have benefitted from the widening participation agenda (Gill, 2017), therefore, students often have families, employment and other responsibilities alongside studying. Therefore, it is imperative that academic staff are transparent about their office hours and provide alternative contact information so that students can make valuable use of their time at university, whilst managing both their studies and other responsibilities effectively.

The social impact within HE cannot be underestimated. The students feel valued by the academic staff and peers, with this developing social capital resulting in an increase in social identity with the HEI and their courses of study. This has significantly supported their transition to HE. However, the pressure to socialise with their respective course groups away from the learning environment was a cause of difficulty for some. Transitioning students may be motivated to develop a new university identity, socialising to facilitate identity exploration, to cope with identity confusion, or as part of their university identity (Riordan and Carey, 2019). Therefore, it can be surmised that conflict could occur with non-traditional students, who often have other responsbilities outside of education that take priority, or are more mature (Gill, 2019). A greater awareness of student demographic by the Students Union may help alleviate social stresses that students feel in their transition to HE and provide more bespoke activities for non-traditional students in HE.

The induction was a key feature of institutional orientation identified as being supportive in the students’ transition to HE. Despite the induction being traditional (Hussey and Smith, 2010), it had most of the relevant constituents to effectively induct students to the HEI and their course (Andersen *et al*., 2012). In fact, the relationships developed in this period between staff and peers went a long way to supporting students through the first year of the course. However, a difficulty in the transition was work-loading, with an assessment submission scheduled in first week of term. Academic staff need to be wary of early assessment submissions, allowing students time to familiarise themselves with regulations, standards and the environment before being assessed. There must be caution against early assessments, allowing time for preparation and for students to understand the marking criteria (Ecclestone, 2004).

Certain aspects of the university’s institutional support were deemed to be supportive to transitioning students from non-traditional backgrounds who utilised these services, such as student services, the ‘job-shop’ and counselling services. However, due to limited information and guidance on the types of support and how to access this support, many of the students didn’t utilise any central support service in their first year. Whilst support is available at HEI’s, there needs to be a coordinated approach to educating all students aware of specific opportunities early (Roksa & Silver, 2019), possibly in the form of correspondence prior to students starting their course, forming a pre-entry intervention strategy. With a reluctance of students to ask for help (Heagney & Benson, 2017), the universities have to take greater responsibility to make information accessible and transparent as possible.

Finally, whilst exploring the features of HE identified by non-traditional students as causing difficulties or providing support, all of these factors are what Clegg (2010, cited in McSweeney, 2014) refer to as a ‘culture of care’ in academia. By exploring people’s experiences of specific aspects of their educational journey, we can identify aspects where development and improvement is required to further support and retain students, whilst providing the best possible chance for success of students from non-traditional backgrounds on their chosen course, within their institution, economically and in the future.

In conclusion, this paper has made an illuminating contribution to the literature by exploring a cohort of non-traditional students’ perceptions of institutional support during their ‘development phase’ transition to a sport and exercise UG degree course, within a post-1992 HEI. Although each experience is individual to a student, there were a number of commonalities within the transitional period: transition induces anxiety; HE provides new opportunities for teaching and learning; social issues are prevalent in the transition to HE; the induction period is key; and institutional support needs refining. Therefore, to facilitate an improved student experience, a series of practical guidelines have been created from the findings and conclusions to help inform academic institutions on how to further support students as they progress through the first year of their course. They are as follows:

* Institutions need to minimise the impact and occurrence of anxiety surrounding academia by providing early-engagement strategies to dispel myths and educate transitioning students on expectations, institutional support services and academic skills within HE.
* Academic staff should be transparent about their office hours, potentially using signage outside offices to display their office hours, whilst also providing alternative contact information for when staff are not available. This will enable students to make valuable use of their time whilst at university.
* A greater awareness of student demographic by the Students Union may help alleviate social stresses that students feel in their transition to HE and provide more bespoke activities for non-traditional students in HE.
* Academic staff need to be wary of early assessment submissions, allowing students time to familiarise themselves with regulations, standards and the environment before being assessed.
* With a reluctance of students to ask for help, the institutions must take greater responsibility to make support information from both central and faculty areas as accessible and transparent as possible.

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