



Supporting students' transition from college to university: Staff perspectives on developing a coherent tertiary system in Scotland

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ABSTRACT

Scottish policy, funding, and quality systems have been tasked to provide “a more coherent and streamlined tertiary education system from the student perspective that delivers the best learning experience for students” (Scottish Funding Council, n.d.). This paper helps to inform this process, by presenting the findings from the second stage of Quality Assurance Agency Enhancement Theme project: *Mind the Gap? College Students' Experience of University*. This stage investigated the perspectives of staff who support students making the transition from college to university.

While there is a relatively broad literature covering the student perspective of this transition, the staff perspective is less well understood. This paper uses the themes developed from the first stage of the project – a qualitative research synthesis on the lived experiences of students (Robertson & Cunningham, 2023) – to investigate staff perceptions of this transition. These themes considered are: (1) the responsibility for enabling effective transition; (2) the extent to which alignment between colleges and universities is achievable or, indeed, desirable; and (3) the extent to which college to university transitions genuinely widen participation.

This paper reports the findings from a series of focus groups with university academic staff, university student support staff, and college academic staff from three institutions (two universities and one college). Using theoretical thematic analysis, the paper considers how sectoral, academic, identity and social, and logistical factors affect, or are identified in, the practice of the participants and what this means for the development of policy and practice around a ‘coherent tertiary model’.

Keywords: transitions, further education, higher education, tertiary, widening participation

Introduction

A 2021 review from the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) (the body that distributes funding for higher and further education in Scotland) considered the establishment of a “coherent, responsive and sustainable tertiary education, skills and research system that balances and delivers the current and future needs of students and employers, and contributes to broader economic and social goals for Scotland” (SFC, 2021, p. 156). While the Scottish Government, who commissioned the review, has not yet made its tertiary education policy explicit, the clear direction of travel is towards greater coherence and collaboration between universities and colleges in Scotland. Work has already begun in this area. For example, Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland, which was previously the quality body for university provision, is leading

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a Tertiary Quality Project developing a common, shared, quality and enhancement framework which will begin in 2025.

As part of its discussion on sector coherence, the SFC review considers “the evolution of [...] tertiary system education pathways through college and university” (SFC, 2021, p. 67), noting the work already done enhancing articulation to support access to degree-level study. This paper aims to help further inform this process, by presenting the findings from the second stage of QAA Enhancement Theme project: *Mind the Gap? College Students' Experience of University*. The first stage of this work (Robertson & Cunningham, 2023) considered student perspectives of the move from college to university, while the focus of this paper is on the perspectives of the staff who support students making the transition, an area that has not been widely considered in previous research. The structure is as follows. First, we set the Scottish context of the transition from college to university. Second, we review what is known in the literature on staff perspectives on this transition. Third, we discuss our methodological approach to completing stage two of our project. Fourth, we share our findings, informed by the conceptualisation used in Robertson and Cunningham (2023). Finally, fifth, we consider how our findings are relevant to developing the college to university transition in the emerging tertiary sector.

Scotland's tertiary sector

The tertiary sector in Scotland consists of 19 universities/specialist higher education institutions (Universities Scotland, 2023) and 24 colleges (Colleges Scotland, 2023). All universities and colleges receive funding from the Scottish Government through the SFC. Scottish-domiciled students do not pay tuition fees directly, with these being paid via SFC or the Scottish Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) depending on the level of study. SFC funding makes up around 78% of funding for colleges (SFC, 2024a) but, in 2021-22, represented only 27% of income for universities (SFC, 2024b), demonstrating the diverse income streams of the latter (although it should be noted that the university sector is not homogenous, with differing reliance on SFC funding between institutions).

The 19 members of Universities Scotland have degree awarding powers (with two of the specialist institutions doing so through validation agreements). Scotland's colleges, in contrast, deliver qualifications maintained by accrediting bodies, such as the Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA), professional bodies or universities. All qualifications and awards in Scotland are benchmarked against a 12-point common Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). Levels 1 to 6 represent school and further education qualifications and levels 7 to 12 higher education levels. Colleges typically support qualifications up to level 8 (ISCED, Level 5- the UNESCO International Standard Classification of Education, which allows for comparison of qualifications internationally) with universities typically supporting level 7 to level 12, with levels 7 to 10 (ISCED level 6) covering undergraduate degree programmes. Colleges also deliver degree-level provision in partnership with awarding universities. Across the university sector a typical undergraduate honours degree takes four years to complete.

While universities in Scotland are autonomous organisations, colleges are classified as public sector bodies, which places some limitations on expenditure and financing. The university sector is diverse – it consists of four ancient universities, four ‘chartered’ universities incorporated in the 1960s, five ‘post-1992’ institutions created by the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act of 1992, two universities incorporated in the early 2000s, three specialist higher education institutions and the distance-learning Open University of Scotland. A regional model for college provision was created following the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act

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2013. There are 13 college regions, each overseen by a regional college board that plans provision and agrees regional outcome agreements between colleges and the SFC, although most of these boards (10) oversee only one college.

The transition from college to university

The SFC review recommended that student pathways from college to university “deliver guaranteed and fair progression for students” and “fully recognise student talents and relevant SCQF credits” (SFC, 2021, p. 67).

Currently there are three main routes for students to move from college to university:

- Advanced standing: where full academic credit is given for college study;
- Advanced progression: where partial academic credit is given for college study; and
- Progression: no academic credit for college study is given, beyond admission to year 1 of the degree programme.

The first two of these are typically managed by articulation agreements between universities and colleges, where the university accepts students with agreed qualifications from the college onto specific degree programmes. The level of entry at university depends on the qualification achieved, curriculum alignment between courses, and university regulations – typically a Higher National Certificate (HNC) would lead to entry in Year 2 of a degree programme, with a Higher National Diploma (HND) leading to entry to year 3. Some universities offer Associate Student status to college students studying programmes that can articulate into university programmes. This gives those student access to some university facilities and events.

SFC have encouraged universities to offer students “articulation with advanced standing (full recognition of prior learning) onto their degree programmes” (SFC, 2021, pp. 66-67). In 2018-19, 57% of students who entered university within three years of completion of a college course did so with advanced standing, 9% entered with advanced progression, and 34% with progression (SFC, 2020). The SFC recognises that entry requirements differ between courses and at institutional level, that curriculum alignment is not always possible and that student preferences change, but their recommendations suggest that the transition across the sector could be better aligned and more supportive to students.

Related to this need for coherence in pathways is the Scottish Government’s widening participation agenda. The Scottish Government’s Commission on Widening Access’s report, *A Blueprint for Fairness*, states “that a child born today in one of our most deprived communities will, by the time he or she leaves school, have the same chance of entering university as a child born in one of our least deprived communities” (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 2). In 2018-19, 28% of Scottish university first-degree entrants arrived via a college route, with 42% of university entrants from the most deprived geographic quintiles following this route (SFC, 2020a). In 2021-22, 16.5% of full-time first-year undergraduate students came from the most deprived quintile, an increase from 12.2% in 2016-17 (Scottish Government, 2024). However, the Commissioner for Fair Access notes that progress has stalled and that the interim target of 18% participation by 2026 may be missed. In suggesting an expansion of his role to cover tertiary education as a whole, the Commissioner notes that:

Further education has an important role to play in facilitating fair access to higher education through articulation. More generally, Scotland is strengthening its ‘tertiary’ focus to align and strengthen post-school outcomes. If we only focus on fair access to higher education, we do not

fully understand fair access and, inadvertently, suggest that fair access to further education is not of concern. We should maintain a focus on increasing the participation of those from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education but situate this within the context of understanding the totality of participation in post-school education. (Scottish Government, 2024, p. 35)

Literature review

The literature on staff perspectives of the transition from college to university is limited. Where staff perspectives are reported it is usually as part of a wider study including students' perspectives or reflecting on the outcome of a specific intervention or project. This review will, therefore, consider what limited evidence there is in the literature, summarise it, and attempt to place the college to university transition into the wider context of student transitions.

In seeking to identify positive staff conceptions of undergraduate students, Wong and Chiu (2020) invited 30 lecturers in social science at two post-92 universities in England to identify the characteristics and attributes that they identified in the 'ideal' student. The authors divide these into personal attributes and academic skills. The personal attributes identified by the participants are preparedness ("many lecturers [...] reiterated that 'reading is essential. I want them to come prepared. This is the ideal thing for me'" (Wong & Chiu, 2020, p. 59), motivation, engagement and active participation (the ideal student being one who "wants to learn and wants to be challenged" (Wong & Chiu, 2020, p. 59). The academic skills identified are academic writing ("being able to structure an essay, to structure an argument [...] basic proofreading skills [and] referencing" (Wong & Chiu, 2020, p. 60), critical thinking, reflection, and independent learning.

Many of the 'ideal' attributes identified by Wong and Chiu (2020) appear in the literature on staff perspectives of college to university transitions, and in others dealing with student transitions more broadly, suggesting that conceptions of desirable student characteristics are common across the university sector and that, in the view of the staff, their cultivation forms the basis of a successful transition.

Mayne et al. (2015) reported on a community of practice of 12 academic staff from universities and colleges in Scotland in the curriculum area of nursing. The group intended to understand practice across the sector; consider alignment of curriculum assessment and learning and teaching; improve articulation opportunities for students; and support students to prepare for transition. As part of this work, and alongside gathering student views, the group sought the views of 17 college staff on their perceptions of students' expectations of higher education. The perceived difficulties identified include academic concerns, such as students' lack of awareness of academic level, concerns about their readiness for independent learning, having been overly supported in college, and personal attributes, such as students' lack of confidence in their own ability. Mayne et al. (2015) also identify external constraints that affect students' ability to study, such as family commitments, time constraints, and financial issues, thus adding social factors to the purely personal characteristics identified by Wong and Chiu (2020).

Morgan (2015) considered staff and student experiences of students moving from foundation degrees in Early Years at four partner further education colleges to a university in England. Again, staff (and students) identified academic skills, specifically the mechanics of academic referencing, and the greater requirement for independent learning at university as major differences in expectation between the programmes. Both college and university staff felt that greater liaison between institutions would help to support student transitions. While this support included social and practical issues, it was mostly focussed on academic skills

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and better informing student expectations of studying at honours level. Staff in both sectors suggested that academic engagement with students while they are still at college, for example academic writing workshops, the submission of work to university for feedback, and the sharing of exemplar work, would support the development of academic skills required.

Similarly to the scarcity of studies dealing directly with staff perspectives of college to university transitions, broadening the literature out to look at staff views of student transitions more generally yields a limited research base. Briggs et al. (2012) discussed the elements of successful transition into university, reporting on projects researching the first-year experience of students at the University of Newcastle in England. The projects included input from school, college, and university students and staff and identified areas of focus, such as pre-entry preparation, student support, learner identity, and learning in higher education. While the authors made recommendations for practice, it was not possible to disaggregate the student and staff input in the published paper.

Discussing the academic preparedness of school students entering the first year of a university programme, Wollscheid et al. (2021), who conducted focus groups with teachers and students at upper-secondary school and higher education institutions across Norway, suggested that educators have the same focus on academic skills identified by Wong and Chiu (2020) and share the concerns about the academic preparedness expressed above in reference to college to university transitions. The main areas identified were independent learning ("to be academically prepared means to take an attitude of responsibility for one's own work, in combination with a higher working load" (Wollscheid et al., 2021, p 28), academic writing, and critical reading.

Broadening out the focus from academic skills and desirable personal attributes, Cage et al. (2021), again as part of a project that also worked with students, reported the views of 40 staff across universities in the UK considering transitions and student mental health. The themes generated from the staff participants echo some of the concerns of other authors, particularly a desire to improve student preparedness for university study, alongside discussion of social aspects such as community belonging and peer support, the challenges faced by support services, and the importance of a 'whole university' approach.

In summary, then, although there are few papers dealing directly with staff perspectives on the student transition from college to university, those that do exist express common concerns with those appearing in the literature around student transitions more generally, namely academic practice and preparedness, personal attributes, and social factors. The characteristics of the 'ideal' student are not just those that are required to be nurtured in students transitioning from college to university, but in university students in general. While universities can work on those attributes with first- and second-year students, the challenge for students transitioning from college through an advanced standing or articulation agreement is that they either need to acquire them as part of the college programme or at a later stage of the university degree programme.

Methodology

Participants

The focus of this study was to identify staff perspectives on the student transition from college to university from participants on both sides of the tertiary sector in Scotland. To this end, a purposive sample was recruited of staff who are either involved in teaching or supporting university programmes that receive

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college-route students or staff involved in college programmes where students typically move on to university. Participants were recruited via email by the researchers. A total of 12 participants were recruited: three university academic staff, five university student support staff, and four college academic staff. The participants came from three institutions (two 'post 92' universities and one college) based in central Scotland. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of City of Glasgow College and informed consent obtained from all participants.

Data collection

A series of four focus groups were held in February and March 2023. The focus groups took the form of semi-structured conversations where college and university staff participated together. One focus group was conducted in person and audio recorded and three were facilitated online and recorded via Microsoft Teams. The focus groups were facilitated by one of the researchers (DR) supported by two student interns who were employed for the project (the findings of the student interns have been published separately by QAA Scotland, see Greenhorn & Wilson, 2023). The choice of online or face-to-face participation was largely decided by the availability of the participants and it is not felt that there was any significant difference in the outputs of each method. Recordings were transcribed automatically using software and then edited by one of the researchers (DR) for accuracy against the recording. The edited transcripts were then used for analysis.

Analysis

Focus group transcripts were analysed using a theoretical thematic analysis (TA) approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2013) identify two ways in which themes may be generated using TA – “themes can be identified in a data-driven, ‘bottom-up’ way, on the basis of what is in the data; alternatively, they can be identified in a more ‘top-down’ fashion where the researcher uses the data to explore particular theoretical ideas, or bring those to bear on the analysis being conducted” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 178) - the latter approach is termed theoretical thematic analysis and was used in this study. As stated above, this research built on previous work looking at the student experience of the college to university transition (Robertson & Cunningham, 2023) and so the themes developed from that work were sought in the transcript data. While Braun and Clarke (2021) acknowledge that TA gives detailed guidance on process it should also support reflexivity and allow for “the fluid, the contextual and contingent” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 329) - for this reason, while mindful of the themes being explored, the coding of data in this study was left sufficiently open and flexible to allow the generation of themes not previously identified.

Coding and theme generation were performed using the six phases of TA as follows:

- Phase 1 - Data familiarisation: Transcripts of the focus groups were read and re-read by both researchers;
- Phase 2 - Generating initial codes: theoretical or deductive code generation was performed by both researchers independently;
- Phase 3 - Searching for themes: from the initial coding themes were generated independently by each researcher. One researcher (DR) used a software-supported approach to code and theme development, using MaxQDA, while one (TC) used a more manual approach;

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- Phase 4 - Reviewing themes and Phase 5 - Defining and naming themes: generated themes were shared by both researchers and, following discussion, the final themes were agreed; and
- Phase 6 - Producing the report: an iterative process of theme development continued as the paper was written and edited.

Findings

We applied four themes (from Robertson & Cunningham, 2023) to our findings: (1) Sectoral factors, (2) Academic factors, (3) Identity and social factors, (4) Logistical factors. In addition, we developed a further theme: (5) Are we problematising articulation?

Sectoral factors

Participants highlighted a range of sectoral factors which influence transitions from college to university. These stem not only from the diversity of the sector and the number of different routes available, but also from differences within institutions themselves.

Routes into university

Many participants mentioned the difficulty, for both staff and students, in understanding and retaining knowledge of the diversity of routes from college to university. As described above, students have a plethora of options, including studying on joint programmes, enrolling on an associate student scheme, entering via agreed articulation routes, or simply through application to university from college:

You've got pure articulation, you've got pathways, associate student, additional funded places [...] but then you've got your non-articulating students, you've got SWAP [Scottish Wider Access Programme] students, so there's loads of different links. [University student support staff]

Such a wide range of options can limit staff ability to develop support for a coherent transition and induction, or to align curricula in a meaningful way. The complexity of routes also makes it difficult for staff to understand the varying needs of students who are arriving at different entry points:

In the university, you know, we're probably not thinking enough about how we're preparing, just within the course itself, you know, to enable people to make that jump. Because we don't do any revision really, you know, we don't go back and cover things that we've missed, you know, and I find myself quite regularly saying to the class 'remember last year when we did...' and then go 'yeah, but you three over there don't have a clue what I'm talking about'. And then having to catch up with them and say this is something we covered. You'll have to go and have a look at it.' [University lecturer]

Differences within the university sector

The university sector is not homogenous. Both college and university staff identified that the majority of (formal and informal) routes from college into university are based at post-92 institutions and on vocational courses:

The older universities, their linkages are a lot less and it's sometimes often very subject specific, whereas we are almost the whole uni. There are very few programmes at [university name] that

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don't allow articulation into them. And even if they don't allow articulation, they will still have college students on them because college students have went through a different route. [University student support worker]

Selective universities (or indeed selective courses within post 92s) have fewer opportunities for college students, and, while these universities remain under pressure from the Scottish Government's widening participation requirements, they do not focus their efforts on creating pathways from college:

If you go to look at [three post-92 universities] for some time now they've been keen on that model. Whereas we know that perhaps the traditional universities have not and whilst they maybe welcome college students [...] they normally would have to go into year one of their programmes again. [College lecturer]

Differences within institutions

Even within institutions there is variety in the way that college students are supported in transitioning. Some are faculty or course focussed, while others use centralised student support teams. Ongoing support and identification of college-route students is patchy, particularly in courses with larger overall cohorts and this diversity in experience makes it difficult to make generalisable findings:

You can see that the difference in different schools just in this one university so, yeah, there's a challenge there of how can you make sure that you're making an accurate comment about how students experience things? [University student support worker]

The tertiary framework

The differences across and within universities make it difficult to have a 'coherent and streamlined approach' within the university sector. In addition, colleges are also autonomous organisations meeting competing demands for their qualifications (from industry, universities, government, etc.) and so alignment with universities is only one of their priorities and there are varied exit routes that represent student success. As such, alignment with universities is only one aspect of a college's role:

Five years ago, 90-odd percent would have been coming with intention to go on to university [...] We're now talking about graduate apprenticeships. We're now talking about employment opportunities. So, you know, you're trying to say this is the information that's here for the university. However, there's this route also. And so yes, when you're doing assessments, you're having to prepare them for the soft skills, employability skills, to build the meta skills. [College lecturer]

These competing sectoral and institutional demands present a challenge to a unified tertiary framework.

Academic factors

Participants highlighted the difference in approaches to teaching and learning practice between colleges and universities. The perceived importance of certain academic skills for university study led to discussions on an academic skills 'deficit' in college students.

Differences in teaching practice

College teaching is characterised by smaller class sizes, more consistent student classes across the programme, and more opportunities for interaction and building relationships with lecturers:

We'll go, 'Right. We've discussed this. What does that mean? OK, the penny hasn't dropped. Let's try and look at it and alternative way'. Do you see? I think we've got a little bit more flexibility in that respect. [College lecturer]

And I know the word that always springs to mind with college is 'quite cozy'. [University lecturer]

University teaching is, usually given the larger cohorts, characterised as being more impersonal, with a greater requirement for individual responsibility on learners:

I think the opportunity to have that informal discourse, you know, hanging back at the end, you know that, that notion that if you want help as a student at uni it's there but you need to very much proactively go and find the lecturer or go to a drop-in session or make sure you make yourself aware at tutorials, whereas I think at college, because you've got a three-hour class you can sense when the class is maybe struggling and needs that support. [College lecturer]

This difference can, of course, be considered a strength of the different sectors:

I've got a boy yesterday who had seven Highers, but he wasn't ready to be in a lecture theatre. He wasn't ready to actually take that jump into university and he himself felt that going with smaller class sizes and the college route first and then going on to university would be better for him. [College lecturer]

Academic skills

Linked to the differences in learning and teaching practice is the different emphasis placed on academic skills in college and university study. As outlined above, college teaching is characterised as more supportive, whereas university places more emphasis on independent learning:

So, college almost, in the first two years maybe, prepares you, you know, you've got that more practical experience being given quite a bit of support and it's almost a case like, you know, it's moving up to the big school a little bit in 3rd year where 'OK now you've got to start doing the work yourself. You've got to start seeking help when you need it. You know we're looking for you to learn a little more independently'. [University lecturer]

In addition, participants identified specific academic skills as requiring development in college-route students. These include those identified by Wong & Chiu (2020):

- Academic writing: "academic writing's kind of hammered into university students from first year onwards. Things like referencing and the way that we expect them to write is different at college. That's the main one." [University lecturer]

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- Referencing: "some students think they're ready for references and then realise they're not. Some people have never used it before because, again, it depends where they are in their college journey [...] and how they've almost been scared into fearing referencing by college lecturers or people who are already at uni." [University student support staff]
- Critical thinking: "the majority of the students have these skills underdeveloped and one particular one, of all of these skills, the one that [...] seems to be a great weakness to these students is how they can formulate a hypothesis, how they can make a hypothesis, how they can use, you know, the existing Information, existing knowledge, existing body of knowledge to make an assumption which can be then be proven to be wrong." [University lecturer]

These skills are generally considered to be in deficit by both college and university staff, with colleges in some places trying to develop them ("so we are actually really tough in terms of imposing uni style learning. They've got to do academic references from day one" [College lecturer]) and university induction processes including workshops to develop them. There is, however, acknowledgement that the different modes of study require different skills, and imposing university academic skills is not always appropriate or necessary for college students:

We cover things like research, academic writing, how to reference, but, as they point out, you know, there is no requirement in the [college] graded unit for them to actually reference.
[University student support worker]

Assessment

College assessments are more likely to involve ongoing, continuous assessment, often with a practical focus. As such, there tends to be less requirement for formal 'academic skills' in the sense that would be understood for university study. This means that assessment can be especially important for students making the transition from college to university. Moreover, the first assessment at university can be critical in making a successful transition:

I don't think that really hits them, no matter how much you talk about it at open days and how much you talk about it in the induction week. You know, I don't think it really hits them until they've actually got their first assignment coming up, and then nobody's there, you know, and it's like, 'well, you know what we told you it was gonna be like that'. [University lecturer]

Students maybe under anticipate how much work they need to put in [...] so sometimes you find that the first hurdle, the first exam diet, some students bomb and then they get that a bit of a shock to the system. [University student support staff]

Curriculum autonomy and alignment

Universities have greater autonomy to develop their own curricula compared to colleges who, as outlined above, tend to deliver qualifications accredited by awarding bodies. Given this restriction, changes to the university curriculum are not quickly able to be reflected in college curricula. University autonomy also means that their curricula even on similar programmes are different across institutions, making it difficult for colleges to align their programmes accordingly.

This question of institutional autonomy is also reflected in participants' recognition of the differing criteria for college student success and to acknowledge that transition to university is only one of these:

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Remember you're doing an HND at that point. You're doing a separate qualification. It isn't first and second year in university, you know, so it still has to be a qualification in its own right. So it's how we bridge the gap for direct entrants [into third year] that then come, take that HND and use it as an entry into university. That's the issue. It would be unfair of us to expect colleges to sort of dance to our tune and change their entire way of teaching just because some of the students will eventually come to university [...] Every college has every right to have its own autonomy in how it presents its HND. [University lecturer]

The alignment of curricula is difficult given the multiple routes into university from college, the differing requirements of universities and the number of courses (and colleges) that articulate into some programmes. Curriculum alignment is easier on joint programmes, where some of a qualification is taught at college before it is completed at university, but the university, as the awarding body, is in control of this relationship:

What we deliver is a programme that [university] have agreed in terms of the subject and the weighting in terms of credit value, but, in terms of contents and things like that, that's very much up to us to deliver it [...] So there is a bit of weird flexibility that the [qualification] has, but we do have to agree everything with [university] in terms of subjects and what they are taught before they can move into third year. [College lecturer]

For stand-alone qualifications, such as Higher National (HN) awards (HNCs and HNDs), where university entry is managed via articulation agreements, alignment is less easy, given the requirements of the awarding body and the differing practices in colleges:

We do curriculum mapping as much as we can between the [HN awards] and what our students study in 1st and 2nd year, that's part of what I do through our articulation agreements. But [participant] and I have discovered one or two things. That students, either they've come in and they have a bit of a knowledge gap [...] or they've forgotten. [University student support staff]

While colleges have some ability to alter curricula, they do so within the limitations imposed by the awarding body. This, combined with the requirement to cover the differing purposes of [HN awards] study and the institutional autonomy of universities, makes sectoral curriculum alignment difficult:

We really do align the curriculum. In an HNC and HND the colleges have got to obviously select how they're going to change their curriculum based on industry needs and their university partners. Where they maybe tailor it to one university it might not suit another university, because universities dictate their own curriculum. {University student support staff}

The ability of universities to alter curricula leads to an, arguably, unequal relationship, where colleges' limited autonomy and multiple goals restricts their capacity to enact curriculum change.

Social and identity factors

Participants highlighted the personal and social factors which can influence students making the transition from college to university.

Personal life

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Participants mentioned personal pressures on students, such as those who have caring responsibilities or those who need income from employment, and the impact this has on their studies. While there was acknowledgement of the issues facing all students, the demographic background of many college-route students means that the problems can be more acute for them:

Because of the cost of living and all the other challenges that they are facing, they make the choice of what is most important to them. And a lot of the time, work is the thing that's most important to them, to try and make money so that they can actually survive [...] And I think as well because we see so many direct-entry students that have come from an MD 20 background, they can't necessarily afford to move and live in [city] because it's expensive. [University lecturer]

Confidence

Several participants mentioned that college students may lack academic and social confidence, and this can hold them back in participating and succeeding:

I believe one major issue is confidence [...] So there are students that they are quite competent and they have the necessary knowledge, yet they may struggle because they [...] don't have the necessary confidence to, you know, to articulate what they know and what they need to do in all the activities. So I believe confidence is a major issue. [University lecturer]

This lack of confidence can be precipitated by moving into a new environment and the focus on learning new academic skills that perhaps undermines students' beliefs in their own subject knowledge and abilities:

I think that sometimes it goes back to the confidence of college students, as they think that the university students who have been here are going to know everything and actually they've got very good practical skills, the college students, from the nature of the [HN awards] and so they sometimes are far ahead of the [university] students. So, it's a ying and a yang and it's good if they immerse themselves together and learn from each other. [University student support worker]

Belonging

Given the relative prestige of the college and university sectors, participants described how college-route entrants are keen to quickly assume the identity of university students:

They don't like being labelled as, you know, coming from college. They just want to be students like everyone else. [University student support worker]

This is true of students on joint programmes where initial study is done at college:

On the LinkedIn group that I set up ... the vast majority of them put [name of university] and don't put student at [name of college]. [College lecturer]

Students do, however, have an anxiety about moving to university, particularly when they are joining an existing cohort:

There are a number who are a bit anxious about taking that step into what they perceive university curriculum to be all about. You know, sitting in a lecture of 300 people and 'oh dear me, who's going to help me', or 'who do I go to if I don't know what the question is in the assessment'. [College lecturer]

This is dealt with more easily at institutions with a high intake from colleges:

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They think they're going to be alone. They think 'oh, I'm coming from college, there's only going to be me and a couple of my pals that are coming with us'. So we make a big push at the start saying 'look, nearly a thousand students come from college every year [...] so you're probably likely seeing people you recognize from [college]'. [University student support staff]

Learning and teaching practices that promote collaborate working can be useful in creating opportunities for assimilation that overcome some of these barriers:

It's the development of community and people feeling part of something. And I think we do so much group work within [subject area] that, you know, people get to work together quite regularly and [...] certainly when I see the students that I've worked with, they've all developed relationships within the groups, you know within the classes. So [...] I think that's helped them because they've got a peer group and then they go into class with a peer group and people want to be part of that peer group as well. So I can see that having a big impact. [University lecturer]

Logistical factors

While there is overlap with some of the personal factors discussed above, participants identified a number of practical, logistical challenges for college students as they move to university.

Student support at university

As discussed above, learning and teaching in college tends to be in smaller classes with more personal contact with lecturers than is the case at university. Student facing larger class sizes and a more distant relationship with staff can find it difficult to access support, particularly with the variety of models between, and even within, institutions (such as the role of central teams and the role of academics in relation to pastoral support):

It's not just about, you know, upping academic level, which, you know, seems to be a big hot topic for all direct-entry students. They also need to feel comfortable that they're gonna be able to work with the library, be able to find the people that they need to find if they need to find them and to make sure that the right support is there. And because it's a different institution and they've got so much to learn, to catch up on, in terms of just being in a new place, never mind the subject specific stuff that might be slightly tailored or different, you know. [University lecturer]

Finding your way around any new building is intimidating. But it's more like just those differences in structure [...] Yeah, I would agree those that do well are those that quickly realise that that source of help isn't as readily available, in terms of on a daily basis. We provide a ton of support for at all levels, but you do have to actually go and find it. [University lecturer]

Induction

Given the academic and logistical issues outlined above, participants in each focus group emphasised the importance of specific induction for college-route students. Again, there was a variety in provision, with a range from longitudinal induction to short summer schools to provide academic skills and logistical support:

We've looked at all the things that people had problems with that are very holistic level and we try very much to prepare them for that. The Associate Student programme is a big part of that. We have them connected with the university from first year, really from when they started university,

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because they start at college so they're actually part of the university as well. So they can access all our stuff. And we get them into the university as much as possible as well. So that they're familiar with it so that it's not that shocking turning up in the first day. [University lecturer]

While participants felt that induction was important, they acknowledged that there are issues with attendance at both face-to-face and online inductions:

What we have found is that the students that do those courses fair far better than the students that don't engage with any of our pre-induction activity. The frustration for us is getting students to actually attend pre-induction activities because, I think, by the time they're finished college, they're done. They're exhausted. And they want to go off and have a summer holiday and not think about anything until they get that e-mail saying 'Welcome to the university'. [University student support worker]

Are we problematising articulation?

In addition to the themes applied from our previous work, a further theme became evident. This centred on the question of whether articulation is, perhaps unduly, being 'problematised'. The transition from college to university is just one of several transitions (school leavers, mature students, international students, and others) that universities are supporting. And all students are managing multiple transitions across their academic journey. So, perhaps, we should not focus too much, or over emphasise, articulation transitions:

The college students that come, the good ones tend to do really, really well and excel because they've maybe got the broader experience, they maybe miss out on that, but when it comes to focusing on their actual degree, they're definitely ready to go that way. And once we get them sorted with the academic writing they tend to do really well. [University lecturer]

These kinds of skills are underdeveloped even for students enrolled on degrees. So I believe this is an issue for students, for university students as well, not only for college students. [University lecturer]

The social and financial challenges identified above are not merely problems for college to university transition students: 'I totally understand that, and it's not just direct-entry students, it's everybody at the moment' [University lecturer]. Moreover, university participants characterised third year as a big step up from second year for existing university students, so the challenges faced by college students are not unique:

There is a big leap from second year in university to third year in university as well. It's not as noticeable because you're in the same building and you'll recognise some of the lecturers, but there's a huge leap in terms of standards that are expected from you and in the detail around what you're gonna be taught and how you need to approach assessments and exams. So, it's the same for them as well. [University lecturer]

Third year is a tough year whether you've come from college or not. [University student support worker]

Despite this, there was recognition that entering with advanced standing requires students to join an existing cohort, often in a curriculum that has not been designed specifically for their prior experience.

There are also expectations around academic skills that may not be developed at college. So, there may still be specific challenges for this group:

When you are coming into any programme, workplace that has been going for two years and you're walking in hallway through so to speak, I think I would, I think we would all [...], there's going to be anxiety'. [University support worker]

Discussion

We structure the discussion on three questions (taken from Robertson & Cunningham, 2023): (1) Where does the responsibility for enabling effective transition lie? (2) To what extent is alignment between colleges and universities possible or, indeed, desirable? (3) Does the current conception of the college to university transition genuinely widen participation?

(1) Where does the responsibility for enabling effective transition lie?

Given the plethora of routes and the multiple outcomes available to college students, and the complexity for staff in understanding this college to university 'ecosystem', where does the responsibility for enabling effective transition lie? If, for example, we accept an academic skills gap or deficit exists between college and university, is this something for colleges to fill, for universities to fix, or indeed individual students to effectively navigate themselves?

This study reinforces the idea (Robertson & Cunningham, 2023) that the responsibility for enabling effective transitions is shared between institutions, staff, and students. Formal and supported articulation routes, such as associate student schemes, provide the opportunity for colleges and universities to work more closely to align curricula and scaffold support for students at appropriate stages of their learner journeys. But the success of all routes between college and university will require the emerging, unified, tertiary sector in Scotland working more closely together.

A key finding from this study is the role the Scottish Government / Scottish Funding Council could play in supporting effective transitions. A recent SFC report on the future of learning and teaching in Scotland notes that: 'Learner's struggle when terminology is used in a way that is unclear or inconsistent' (SFC, 2024c, p. 2). Whilst this is in the context of 'blended learning' we believe it applies across the tertiary sector. There needs to be simplified and consistent language used to explain and characterise the transition from college to university. Our findings highlight it is not just students, but also staff, who struggle with the complexity and overlapping terminology used about this transition.

(2) To what extent is alignment between colleges and universities possible or, indeed, desirable?

The findings from our study question the extent to which colleges should 'be for' university study. The depth and breadth of college provision came through, recognising that college courses are much more than simply 'feeders' into further academic work. HNC and HND qualifications stand by themselves and can rightly be the final destination for student study.

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While universities and colleges have formal linkages around progression, given the diversity of routes, there is little communication at sectoral level around student outcomes, success, and issues, so it is difficult to identify requirements for change. Nevertheless, as a more coherent unified tertiary sector emerges, there are opportunities for closer alignment between colleges and universities. In relation to the challenges and opportunities for the future of learning and teaching, the recent SFC report (SFC, 2024c, p. 8) argues that: "We in fact found that there were no significant differences between colleges and HEIs [Higher Education Institutions], but the evidence does point to a number of similarities".

One area which would be of specific interest to articulation would be the tracking of student success across the tertiary sector. Our study found that, while universities and colleges have formal linkages around progression, given the diversity of routes there is scope to enhance communication around student outcomes, success and issues between colleges and universities. Doing so would also help to identify examples of best practice as well as requirements for change. In his most recent report, the Commissioner for Fair Access also recommended that "stakeholders should explore the prospects for introducing a single student identifier to improve tracking and to facilitate more robust evaluation of the impact of fair access activity" (Scottish Government, 2024, p. 49).

(3) Does the current conception of the college to university transition genuinely widen participation?

Our findings reinforce the idea of a deficit or gap for students making the transition from college to university. This features most clearly, for the staff we spoke to, in relation to academic skills and preparedness for university study, where students are seen as needing more support. These findings were somewhat tempered by the suggestion that we are perhaps overthinking, or over problematising, the specific transition from college to university, especially noting that the literature suggests an 'ideal' model of an undergraduate student that applies to all entrants. All students face challenges making transitions into, through, and out of university. Some of our participants questioned, therefore, whether the focus on this specific transition was misplaced (or at least over emphasised). Nevertheless, we believe there are specific academic and social challenges faced by students making the transition from college to university.

As with our previous findings (Robertson & Cunningham, 2023), we would continue to question whether current practice genuinely widens access to university study, particularly for selective courses at 'elite' institutions, where advanced entry with HNC/D may not be possible. The emergence of a unified tertiary sector may provide a catalyst for more conversations on this topic.

Conclusion

This paper has aimed to support and inform the desire to move towards “a more coherent and streamlined tertiary education system from the student perspective that delivers the best learning experience for students” (SFC, n.d.). We have presented the findings from the second stage of QAA Enhancement Theme project: *Mind the Gap? College Students' Experience of University*. This second stage investigated the perspectives of staff who are actively supporting students making the transition from college to university.

We found that staff perspectives mirror what is known about the lived student experience of making the transition from college to university. These include: 1) Sectoral factors, (2) Academic factors, (3) Identity and social factors, (4) Logistical factors. In addition, we identified a further theme for staff: (5) Are we problematising articulation? Our findings emphasise the importance of simplifying both the process and the terminology of articulation, the potential of the emerging tertiary sector to better connect colleges and universities, and the scope for articulation to further widen access to university in Scotland.

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