



## Teaching first-year students during transition to higher education: An autoethnographical account

Amy Tomlinson, University of Hull

Clare Killingback, University of Hull

### ABSTRACT

Transition to the first-year of higher education represents a key period of change for students and is a powerful element of the university experience. Educators are key in facilitating successful first-year experiences and must understand the multidimensional aspects of transition in order to effectively support diverse student groups. This study adopts an autoethnographic methodology to explore the experiences of an educator teaching first-year students during transition to higher education. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted using data from a period of the educators' reflexive journaling, identifying three themes for discussion: managing variation, everchanging hats, and worthwhile efforts. Implications for practice are identified and the process of writing an autoethnographic piece is reflected upon. This autoethnography encourages educators to reflect and develop a deeper understanding of the self and others for the benefit of the learning and teaching environment.

**Keywords:** first-year, university, transition, autoethnography

### Introduction

Transition to the first-year of higher education (HE) represents a key period of social and intellectual change for students and is a powerful element of the university experience (Johnston, 2010). It encompasses much more than just the traditional induction period, and should be viewed as a longitudinal process with support spanning from pre-entry until the end of the first year (Whittaker, 2008). Students are at the greatest risk of attrition during transition, therefore this period is widely considered a priority by institutions (Thomas, 2013; Lin et al., 2022). Retention is often a key focus, however focusing on the engagement, empowerment, and learning experiences of students during transition is important in ensuring that students have the opportunity to reach their full potential (Brownlee et al., 2009; Whittaker, 2008).

The transition to HE can present various stressors for first-year students as they attempt to develop independence, make new friends, adjust to new living arrangements, and manage work commitments (Worsley et al., 2021). There are also challenges relating specifically to learning, as students must develop independent study skills, adjust to large group teaching, and get to know course staff and peers (Cifuentes Gomez et al., 2022; Worsley et al., 2021). A variety of initiatives have been suggested and implemented in an attempt to bridge the gap between further and higher education, including employing specialist support advisors, working with feeder institutions to provide pre-entry support, and academic and social integration activities (Gordon, 2016; Whittaker, 2008). However, in order to be effective, transition enhancement

initiatives must ensure that they reflect the diverse and changing needs and experiences of first-year students (Johnston, 2010). Therefore, time spent understanding first-year students and factors that may improve their experience is considered time well spent (Johnston, 2010).

Students transitioning to university are not a homogeneous mass of stereotypical ‘freshers’ (Johnston, 2010). Cohorts are becoming increasingly diverse, likely influenced by the successful widening participation agenda and improved inclusivity and accessibility initiatives (Brownlee et al., 2009; De Clercq et al., 2022; Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018; Office for Students, 2022). This has the potential to provide important individual benefits, enhancing cognitive, emotional, and social development (Milem, 2003). However, this can also present additional challenges, particularly within a new first-year cohort who bring much more than just their academic ability and entry grades when transitioning to university education (De Clercq et al., 2022; Erickson et al., 2009; Johnston, 2010). For example, background, aspirations, self-efficacy, motivation, and expectations are all likely to influence student performance and interaction with learning and teaching, and each of these have their own wide spectrum (Gibbs, 2010; Lin et al., 2022; Tomlinson et al., 2023). It is therefore vital that teaching staff understand the diversity within a new student cohort, avoid generalisations, and embed support within mainstream teaching activity (Whittaker, 2008).

First-year teaching should be considered a specialised academic activity given the distinctiveness of the student group (Johnston, 2010). It is a valuable time for developing learning behaviours and beliefs about learning and knowing that will contribute to future success, and therefore requires greater emphasis and priority (Brownlee et al., 2009; Harvey et al., 2006; Johnston, 2010; Yorke & Longden, 2008). Assigning appropriate tasks, encouraging effective practice, and providing the correct feedback to meet the diverse needs of first-year students is essential but can be challenging, particularly if educators want to engage them in learning beyond surface level and encourage overall academic development (Erickson et al., 2009). Encouraging personal development is also an important but challenging task, as educators must help students learn how to behave with confidence and intelligence in the face of difficulty (Johnston, 2010). It is imperative that educators assess whether their teaching enables this development and avoid rigid approaches that may inhibit learning, with the most student-focused educators working with first-year students wherever possible (Harvey et al., 2006; Westlake, 2008).

It is not the sole responsibility of educators to support transition to HE, with university services playing a large and pivotal role. However, educators are key in facilitating successful first-year experiences and must understand the multidimensional aspects of transition in order to effectively support diverse student groups (De Clercq et al., 2022; Johnston, 2010; Whittaker, 2008). Therefore, this study aimed to explore the experiences of an educator teaching first-year students during transition to HE. Self-reflection and subsequent development can be considered an effective way to do this, as “teachers must change themselves before changing their students and changing their teaching” (Song & Taylor, 2005, p. 162).

---

## Method

### Study design

---

An autoethnographic methodology was adopted for this study. Autoethnography can be described as the combination of detailed narrative personal experiences with cultural analysis and interpretation (Austin &

Hickey, 2007; Chang, 2016; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). It allows for flexible emphasis on the 'auto' (self), 'ethno' (culture), and 'graphy' (research process) in relation to one another, making the field rich and interesting (Winkler, 2018). Over the last 50 years, it has developed into what is now considered a structured, formal, and recognised approach to self-study (Austin & Hickey, 2007). Autoethnography draws upon various qualitative traditions such as autobiography, ethnography, arts-based research, and narrative research, but transcends descriptive storytelling to frame personal experiences within the wider story of society (Chang, 2016; Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). This method was chosen given its ability to benefit self-transformation in educators, and enable them to "gain profound understanding of self and others and function more effectively with others from diverse cultural backgrounds" (Chang, 2016, p. 13). It has been described as a powerful method for enabling a critical awareness of one's social reality, and in turn developing social-betterment in those who teach (Austin & Hickey, 2007).

### Positioning the researcher

---

In autoethnographic research, it is considered important to provide an overview of the researcher's background in relation to the study to allow readers to understand the context in which data is presented (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In this study, I (the first named author) am the primary focus of inquiry and hold the roles of narrator, interpreter, and researcher, where other individuals referred to in journal entries are explored only in terms of their associated relationships. This approach is considered the most common within autoethnography (Chang, 2016). I am an educator with 10 years' experience in further and higher education, teaching on both sport and healthcare programmes. I am also a qualitative researcher with an interest in pedagogy, specifically inclusive education, compassionate pedagogy, and transition to HE. An uninterrupted period of pedagogic research activity and a strong desire to improve my teaching and research practices resulted in a prolonged period of reflexive journaling. Reflexive journaling involves the recall of and reflection on experiences, particularly social and interpersonal interactions, and can be useful in developing carefully considered ways to address challenges (Meyer & Willis, 2019). Discussion of this reflexive journaling with the second named author made me keen to analyse further my own experiences of teaching students during transition to HE. I felt this insight and understanding to be important in enabling me to develop my own practice, provide better student support, and facilitate an inclusive and successful transition period. The second author is an experienced educator and qualitative researcher with over 10 years' experience in HE teaching and programme development. Our shared interest in learning and teaching has resulted in several collaborations and naturally promoted involvement in this research.

### Data collection

---

Data regarding my experiences of teaching students during their transition to HE were collected retrospectively from personal journaling. A specific 12-week period of journaling was selected as the focus of this study as it included a detailed season of reflexive practice regarding my leadership of one first-year module. This period was selected because of the consistency of journal entries, which followed every scheduled teaching session and assessment date. Data were journal entries containing a fluid combination of self-observations and self-reflections. The self-observations were factual data about events at the time of writing such as student behaviour within a teaching session, and self-reflections were concerned with feelings and perspectives of my reflective journey over this specified time period (Chang, 2016; Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). For context, I was the lead and sole lecturer for the module concerned here, planning and

facilitating all content and assessments. The module employed a flipped approach, involving weekly online pre-session content and in-person seminars and practical sessions, and culminating in two assessments during the associated assessment period. As a first-year module, the main focus was knowledge and skill acquisition, with students also being supported to develop their independent learning skills and adjust to university study. There are typically between 60 and 80 students enrolled on the module each year.

Data analysis and writing the report

An inductive reflexive thematic analysis was conducted within NVivo qualitative data analysis software using the six steps described by Braun and Clarke (2021). Firstly, data in the form of journal entries from the specific 12-week period were copied verbatim into NVivo. Here they were read and re-read in as part of stage one, data familiarisation, before being organised into meaningful groups in stage two, data coding. In stage three, themes were searched for within the data, and codes combined to form potential themes. Stage four involved theme development and review, ensuring that themes contained data forming a coherent pattern and an accurate representation. Stage five involved defining and naming themes to ensure that each theme had a clear focus. Finally, in stage six the report was produced, narratively presenting the data in an analytical way specific to the study aim. Meaningful verbatim extracts were also selected and included to help tell the story of the data with personality and authenticity. From the many ways to analyse autoethnographical data, this method was chosen given its flexibility, focus on meaning, and aim of generating contextualised and situated knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Elements of both semantic and latent analysis were used to explore meaning at both a surface and an underlying level. All phases were conducted by the first author, with support and data cross-checking from the second author for stages two, three, and four which is considered a valuable tool for reliability in qualitative research (Barbour, 2001).

It is acknowledged that awareness of the research project can affect qualitative data analysis, therefore, I engaged in regular dialogue with the second author who acted as a critical friend and helped me to explore and frame my experiences. Details such as academic year, programme, module, and content topics have been omitted for anonymity preservation.

Understandings

This section describes and discusses my synthesised experiences from 22 journal entries totalling 10,043 words. Three main themes were identified and constructed through thematic analysis: managing variation, everchanging hats, and worthwhile efforts. A breakdown of the subthemes within each theme can be seen in Table 1. Each theme will first present synthesised experiences and reflections, followed by discussion situating these experiences in the context of wider literature. The section concludes with my reflections on writing an autoethnography.

Table 1

Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Managing variation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Expectations and aspirations</li><li>● Student conduct</li></ul>
Everchanging hats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Roles beyond teaching</li></ul>

Worthwhile efforts

- The module leader as a first line of support
- Developing students as learners
- Student appreciation
- Personal development

---

### Managing variation

---

My role as a module leader of students during transition to HE involves working to help diverse individuals collectively and successfully progress through university education and towards their future career. It should not be confused with a 'one size fits all' approach or an attempt to turn all students into what one would consider the 'ideal'. Instead, it is a desire to enable every individual to function effectively in the university environment and empower them to be the best they can be. The following theme relates to my experiences of variation seen within a first-year cohort.

#### *Expectations and aspirations*

Understanding the individually unique and varied students I have in the room is vital in ensuring they have the support they need to thrive. However, this is no easy task and is something I often find challenging with a large, new cohort who are still developing the confidence required to communicate effectively with myself as a staff member. My awareness of the communication barrier between students and staff, and a desire to get to know my students and support their overall transition experience led me to set up a discussion around expectations and aspirations as part of the module introduction. Students were invited to anonymously contribute their expectations and aspirations using Mentimeter interactive presentation software. I could then use this to initiate discussion topics amongst the cohort without linking to specific individuals. There were students who chose not to submit a response, however I felt that merely being around these conversations would be thought provoking for students and help them reflect on what they expect to get out of university.

Through this activity, students highlighted a vast array of expectations and aspirations. Some expected to take responsibility for their learning and wanted to engage in contemporary, active learning methods, seeing university as a valuable opportunity for success in their chosen career. Others expected learning that could be described as largely passive, led and managed by staff, and saw university primarily as an opportunity for fun. I am mindful of respecting individual differences, particularly around aspirations, and avoid navigating discussions based on my own views, however I do find it difficult to accept that some students may be here primarily for the 'university experience', rather than a successful future. Documenting my perspective after this session helped me ensure that I maintained focus on aligning student expectations with the realities of programme specific university learning and highlighting possibilities for the future, rather than questioning aspirations:

It seems that expectations and aspirations are on a large spectrum, which I am finding it hard to get my head around, but expectations inform actions, so I know that this needs to be a consistent focus.

One of my goals with this activity was to help develop communication between myself as a lecturer and my students. I see this as being an important part of making myself approachable to students so that if they are struggling, particularly through the transition season, they would feel comfortable to talk to me:

The discussion was strained initially, but it didn't take long for the conversation to start flowing once a few confident students led the way. I feel that I have learned a lot about the group that I otherwise wouldn't have, and have started to break down some communication barriers.

#### *Student conduct*

Another key variation I noticed in my first-year students relates to student conduct. By this, I mean their behaviour and actions within teaching sessions, which may be linked to their expectations, aspirations, and reasons for attending university. For example, when setting activities in practical skills sessions, I found the majority were highly engaged and appeared to enjoy the tasks. These students seemed to be motivated, interested, and asked complex questions to develop their understanding. These were the students I wanted to spend my time with. However, others seemed to require regular check-ins and monitoring just to maintain attention. Whilst the latter are definitely the minority, on occasion they can hold my focus, and cloud my judgement of how the group are adapting to university learning as a whole. A specific journal extract reads:

During today's practical session, a student commented how they were slightly overwhelmed with the difficulty of the content following pre-session work, however engaging with the tasks within the in-person session had made it all make sense. On the way out, a number of other students also commented on how useful the tasks had been. Conversely, another group of students spent the majority of the session 'going through the motions' but grossly off topic with their conversations despite my efforts to engage them. A member of the group mentioned that they hadn't bothered with any pre-session work so far, laughing about this to their peers.

From my perspective, students who initially appeared disengaged and disinterested in completing pre-session work appeared to become more involved as the module progressed. However, noticeable variation across the group remained. This variation also appeared to extend to assessments which is concerning given their importance for foundational subject knowledge, but is perhaps influenced by the fact that the first year of study does not count towards overall degree classification:

The variation in attitudes during exams was interesting to observe. There are some students that seem determined, want to demonstrate their learning, push themselves to answer questions, and seem proud to show you what they can do. Then there are those who seem unbothered by their lack of knowledge, inability to answer questions, and poor performance. It makes me wonder where my responsibility starts and stops as a lecturer.

I found it strange to have such opposing interactions within the same cohort on a HE programme which students had elected to study. I found myself questioning if there was any way in which my practice may have contributed to the conduct of a small number of students. I found a quote delivered by a coach on a continuing professional development course and recorded within a journal entry particularly helpful in maintaining a balanced perspective:

Don't become so focused on what the disengaged minority are or aren't doing, that you disregard the impact you are having on the rest of the group.

I noticed that as the transition to university study progresses, the friendship groups that form often present with similar levels of motivation, aspiration, expectation etc. However, I have also noticed that this is changeable depending on the presence of particular characters. During one practical session where a particular student was absent, a group of students that often lack interest or enthusiasm were



unrecognisable; they were fully engaged, asking and answering questions, and demonstrating an overall desire to learn. This presents an additional challenge when attempting to understand my students, as I struggle to identify true support needs from the version of themselves being portrayed in front of certain peers.

### *Discussion*

There are many factors that could influence the variation seen within student expectations and aspirations, including social media, family and peers (Tomlinson et al., 2023). Informal influences within a neighbourhood are also said to influence expectations around educational achievement, and can impact subsequent actions when expectations are unmet (Nash, 2002). This is a likely contributor towards the expectation and aspiration diversity within my student cohort given that they span high, medium, and low HE participation areas, and are a mixture of first and continuing generation students. Facilitation of student-staff dialogue that provides consideration of diverse student experiences, expectations, and aspirations is considered an important way to support first-year students during their transition experiences (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006; Johnston, 2010; Tomlinson et al., 2023). During this dialogue and subsequent action, of utmost importance is ensuring that educators working with first-year students are representing educational reality, as expectations that diverge from reality are said to impact students' ability to adapt to the learning environment (Bates & Kaye, 2013; Cifuentes Gomez et al., 2022; Johnston, 2010). Although this is something I already action, upon reflection I could embed these conversations more regularly within my practice by allowing space within a content plan for such discussions. This would be particularly important around the introduction of new or different learning and teaching methods.

A factor that may further add to the complexity of the variation seen within students during transition to university is the peer effect. This is particularly noticeable during transition to HE as school friendships are disrupted and students work to build connections that will help them integrate into the university community (Thiemann, 2017). Research suggests that the peer effect can influence assessment grades, more in some areas than others, and have a greater influence over career choices (Sacerdote, 2014). Mixing friendship groups for group work could be considered an easy solution, however must be exercised with caution as friendship is reported to have a positive effect on task performance (Chung et al., 2018). I am conscious that regardless of the transition support provided, characters and friendships within each cohort can be difficult to manage. However, what can and should be actioned is the promotion of an environment in which all students feel comfortable to be their authentic selves regardless of peer presence.

In addition to the aforementioned effects of varied expectations, aspirations, and peer groups, variations in motivation are also likely to impact student choices and subsequent learning behaviour. The expectancy-value theory of motivation (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) highlights the importance of perceived task value and expectations of success in informing student choices, and could be a useful consideration when working with first-year cohorts. It is said to be informed by student characteristics and environmental influences, which are not modifiable by a Module Leader. However, a combination of success empowerment and emphasis on multiple types of value (attainment, intrinsic, utility, and cost) may be useful in promoting desired engagement in those that are harder to reach (Leaper, 2011).

Finally, when discussing student variation, acknowledgement must be given to the 'Robert and Susan problem' described by Biggs and Tang (2011). Susan represents academic students that are bright, committed, and will learn well regardless of the teaching they experience. Robert represents less academic students who may have little background knowledge, lack commitment, and are mainly at university to do

enough to pass and gain a qualification. Both students experience the same teaching, but where Susan is motivated to ensure deep learning, Robert believes that if he can record the essential information and recite it in assessments, he will do enough to pass. With higher proportions of Roberts in contemporary HE, educators are challenged to teach in a way that decreases the gap between Roberts and Susans (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Active learning methods that encourage high level engagement such as relating, applying, and theorising are a way to do this, and should be employed by educators to help students fulfil their potential (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

---

### Everchanging hats

---

My varied role as a first-year Module Leader requires basic knowledge of many areas, such as administration, health, pastoral care, etc. It also requires me to draw upon those with specialist skills in order to support the functioning and development of the student as a whole person during transition. This theme relates to my experiences and perceptions of role variation whilst teaching first-year students and the everchanging hats I have to wear.

#### *Roles beyond teaching*

Whilst my primary responsibilities are to instil subject knowledge and promote academic development, day-to-day experiences reveal that my role with first-year students extends far beyond this. Particularly in the early stages of transition, I find myself navigating a variety of roles that extend beyond the demands of module learning and teaching, but are crucial in shaping the student experience and helping them adjust to university life. In addition to matters of the curriculum, I am often required to field questions relating to IT, student finance, enrolment, timetabling, mental health support and learning difference diagnosis to name but a few topics. I am comfortable in doing this, however I do feel that it is a 'hidden' aspect of working with first-year students that is often overlooked:

Turning up to teach a first-year session involves much more than facilitating the learning of content. At the end of today's session, I had a queue of students waiting to ask questions, but not one about the session content. I was asked how to get a student card, how to sign up at a local GP surgery, how to apply for a parking permit, how to set a new password on the virtual learning platform, and a variety of other questions.

Whilst I am happy to field such questions providing they do not interfere with module learning, it can be time consuming. Interactions occur in a variety of ways, such as by email, virtual learning platform messages, booked meetings, or before/during/after scheduled teaching sessions, and with large first-year cohorts, this can be a lot to manage:

This week has felt a little like firefighting in terms of the amount of student queries. I have to remind myself that this will reduce as the students settle in and focus on the positive that they are reaching out.

In an attempt to manage issues not specifically related to module learning and teaching with minimal impact, I scheduled a weekly 'drop in' session from week three onwards. This was an hour in which I was free for any student on the module to come without appointment and discuss problems and ask questions. This was poorly utilised, perhaps due to the fact it required additional effort to attend, and students continued to use the aforementioned methods to raise issues.



### *The Module Leader as a first line of support*

Something I found interesting was the fact that regardless of the plethora of support services first-year students have access to and are made aware of, many seem to still approach me as the Module Leader first. They often seem aware that I do not have the specialist skill set they need and will signpost them to the relevant services, but do not approach the services directly in the first instance. This can at times feel overwhelming, as I am providing basic first line support in a variety of areas for many students despite the allocation of individual Personal Supervisors/Tutors.

Initially, I felt that some students just saw me as a person who worked for the university. A face that they could direct any question towards or help with any problem, regardless of the nature. It has taken time for them to see me primarily as Module Leader, and understand the systems that are in place to support other aspects of their university learning and experience.

The priority is that students have someone to direct their questions towards, despite initially not always being the most appropriate person. Non-academic queries did reduce as the module progressed and students seemingly became more familiar and comfortable with the university environment, but did continue to occur on a smaller scale.

### *Discussion*

Despite often finding it difficult, students value being able to approach academic staff for guidance and clarification (Thomas, 2013). This is important, as it has been found to promote feelings of belonging, increase academic satisfaction, and result in students being less likely to consider leaving HE (Thomas, 2013; Wong & Chapman, 2023). It has been suggested that smaller cohorts are more comfortable approaching lecturers and seeking assistance when experiencing difficulties, compared to students in larger cohorts who perceive greater problems around staff approachability and support (Worsley et al., 2021). This is in contrast to the actions of the large cohort discussed in this autoethnography, but is perhaps somewhat impacted by perceptions of cohort size.

Whilst student comfort in approaching academic staff is largely positive, the additional responsibility placed upon those teaching first-year cohorts should be considered. The volume of queries relating to matters beyond module learning presents additional workload, and may also delay appropriate support if such queries are beyond the capabilities of the academic staff member. Whilst it is not appropriate to suggest that module learning and wider university or personal matters are mutually exclusive, early introduction to easily accessible and clear support systems are important in easing transition management responsibilities for both staff and students (Johnston, 2010; Killingback et al., 2024).

Providing they are effective, personal tutoring systems in which students can access academic, personal, and pastoral support are one way to facilitate appropriate transition support and help to humanise institutions (Wootton, 2006; Yale, 2019). However, personal tutors are usually academics who are simultaneously trying to juggle lecturing, assessing, research, and administrative commitments (Ghenghesh, 2018), further adding to the already multifaceted role of those working with first-year students. Some institutions employ a dedicated individual to take on the role of a 'student liaison officer', who acts as a sole point of contact for students and liaises with academic and central services to ensure that every student is provided with comprehensive and well-coordinated support (Whittaker, 2008). Providing this individual is available and regularly visible, for instance at the start/end of scheduled teaching sessions, this is likely to allow Module Leaders more time to focus on specialised teaching. However, the financial implications of additional staff must be considered. It has been suggested that a curriculum-based

approach in which personal tutoring is built into modules by academic staff is most appropriate given the enhanced ability to develop meaningful staff/student relationships, making students more likely to seek support (Owen, 2002). In which case, perhaps targeted training and sufficient workload allocation time for transition support activities should be prioritised for those teaching first-year students. In essence, this could be seen as a compassionate pedagogic approach as it is responding to a level of distress in students. The efforts of first-year educators in considering the whole student and attending to needs beyond the academic are further demonstrations of compassionate pedagogy (Chand et al., 2022). Similarly, designing curricula in collaboration with diverse learners, acknowledging student humanity before academic achievements, and promoting the importance of student selfcare are compassionate principles which could be tailored to a first-year cohort. This would serve as guidance for educators who are trying to provide effective support and learning opportunities during what can be a distressing transition period.

---

### **Worthwhile efforts**

As an educator working with first-year students transitioning to HE, I want to be able to step back and trust that my efforts have equipped students with the skills needed to function and develop as independent adult learners within the HE environment. This theme presents the effects of my efforts on both students and myself.

#### *Developing students as learners*

I find being part of the first-year transition journey hugely rewarding. What at times can feel frustrating and like significant additional effort for little appreciation, actually results in valuable development and an enjoyable experience for many students.

I directed significant effort towards developing an appropriate level of student understanding around learning and teaching theory in order to address areas of the hidden curriculum and develop students into independent learners. I also introduced key concepts such as a flipped learning approach, explained what is needed for success, and embedded targeted tasks throughout module teaching to improve learning effectiveness. Initially I was unsure how well this had been understood, however the benefits slowly became evident. Students developed an improved desire and ability to take responsibility for their own learning, and began to seem more interested in seeking academic support and approaching me with appropriate questions, the nature of which were increasing in depth and thoughtfulness. I also perceived student engagement and enjoyment to improve, which in turn made sessions more enjoyable for me:

Things seem to have clicked into place for many students, they seem to have developed a structure to their learning and an understanding of how learning looks for them. Maybe it is just a result of routine, or maybe their increasing love for the subject has increased dedication towards their learning. Regardless of the reason, I am enjoying watching their progress.

#### *Student appreciation*

As the weeks progressed and students became more familiar with HE, they appeared to become more appreciative of the effort I dedicated to facilitating engaging and inclusive sessions that not only covered subject content, but also helped to develop them as learners. This was particularly clear in the end of module evaluation, but also in person, as students who had previously said very little expressed their gratitude:

Two students hung back after the session today with it being their last. One shook my hand and wanted to thank me for teaching them as they had “really enjoyed the module”. The other expressed that having the job role of a ‘teacher’ doesn’t automatically mean that the individual can teach, but in this module, they had found the teaching effective, enjoyable, and appreciated the lessons that they had experienced.

Even small demonstrations of appreciation such as a ‘thank you’ on the way out of a session gave me reassurance that I didn’t know I needed. I often described that these situations had “given me a lift” or “made me feel positive”, and definitely helped me to maintain motivation when working with a year group that can often be challenging.

#### *Personal development*

In addition to my efforts paying off for students, I also noticed significant personal development. I felt that my organisation improved, I became better at problem solving and providing support, and more adaptable in response to feedback. I felt more relaxed and resilient, which helped me to manage challenges effectively. Although I already had a love for pedagogy, I experienced even more drive to improve my knowledge for the benefit of my students, making my integration of specific tools more effective.

#### *Discussion*

Efforts directed towards developing them as university learners are often welcomed by students, who do not want lecturers to presume they are familiar with more independent ways of working upon entry (Yorke & Longden, 2008). Literature has suggested that directing efforts towards developing first-year learners can also result in both personal and academic development for lecturers, as well as teaching that becomes more enjoyable and satisfying (Johnston, 2010). This satisfaction appears to extend to university teaching as a whole, with over 75% of academics suggesting that their teaching is a source of satisfaction to them and one of the primary joys of the job (Times Higher Education, 2016). Whilst there are many factors influencing job satisfaction, perceived student appreciation communicated through the sharing of positive feedback has been found to have an effect (Nassar et al., 2022; Tohidinia & Haghighi, 2011). However this is not always available, as it has been noted that some students do not feel the need to share positive feedback as they can see this as thanking someone for merely doing their job (Nassar et al., 2022).

In addition to its impact on job satisfaction, first-year student feedback is important in understanding the effectiveness of efforts and adapting appropriately. This is particularly important given the aforementioned diversity and variation within first-year cohorts, coupled with the time it takes them to settle in and feel comfortable to approach teaching staff. Whilst feedback gathered through mid/end of module evaluation questionnaires are valuable, these are each limited to a single time point and increased regularity would undoubtedly add benefit. Student pedagogical teams in which small groups provide formative feedback on pedagogical practice throughout a module have been identified as a student-centred way to increase the regularity and quality of feedback (Hayward et al., 2018). This intentional student-staff dialogue can therefore be beneficial in facilitating early adaptations that meet the specific needs of a cohort, and providing reassurance to drive the continuation of successful practice.

#### *Reflections on writing an autoethnography*

---

Writing is not exclusive to reporting findings; as shown here, it can also be a realisation, a method of inquiry, and a facilitator of personal discovery (Pelias, 2011). Critically reflecting upon my experiences

provided me with a deepened understanding of their meaning, and an increased awareness of impact on both myself and the students I teach. I have a renewed sense of confidence in my ability to draw upon and learn from important experiences within practice, that has since facilitated resilience and my ability to navigate challenges. I resonate with the words of Lake (2015, p. 684) "Autoethnographic research does not call on practitioners to have the answer, but to share, enlighten others and grow. Autoethnography represents the choice of practitioners to understand, not to simply explain." I hope this autoethnography will encourage others to reflect, and develop a deeper understanding of the self and others for the benefit of the learning environment.

It must be acknowledged that although many consider autoethnographers as self-reflexive, self-respectful, and self-knowing scholars, some still view autoethnography as self-indulgent (Winkler, 2018). It is hoped that situating my experiences within relevant literature has maintained the intended purpose of considering the self within the wider social context and culture. The legitimacy of autoethnographic data has previously been questioned, along with a misguided notion that if the same data were gathered and written up by another author, it would somehow be more valuable (Wall, 2008). It has also been suggested that autoethnography has the potential for selective sharing of information, however Winkler (2018) rightly compares this to other forms of qualitative research, whereby participants may share as much as they feel comfortable to share providing this does not affect the accuracy of the data overall. I express that research integrity was prioritised throughout data collection, analysis, and presentation of the aforementioned understandings, and that second author involvement served as an additional tool to aid transparency.

## Conclusion

The aim of writing this autoethnography was to explore my experiences as an educator of first-year students during transition to HE in order to develop my own practice and better support the transition period. Findings highlight the significance of understanding and managing student variation, the breadth of responsibilities educators navigate, and the positive personal and pedagogical outcomes that result from sustained effort and reflective practice. A number of key implications for my own practice have been identified that could also serve as recommendations for others. Firstly, regular open dialogue with students that considers diverse experiences, university expectations, and aspirations is important in helping varied students adapt to the realities of university learning and promoting success. An environment should be created in which all students feel comfortable to be their authentic selves, with a focus on active learning and multiple types of task value in order to promote engagement. Early, clear, and accessible support systems should be available during transition, with targeted transition training available for those teaching first-year students. Finally, regular feedback should be gathered from first-year students during the transition period in order to facilitate early adaptations and drive the continuation of successful practice.

## Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

## Biographies

*Amy Tomlinson* has been practicing as a Sport Rehabilitator since graduation in 2013. She completed her PGCE in 2016 and has been a lecturer at the University of Hull since 2018, teaching on various undergraduate and postgraduate modules. Amy holds Advance HE Senior Fellowship and her current research interests lie in pedagogy, specifically student expectations, compassionate education, and transition to higher education.

*Dr Clare Killingback* graduated as a physiotherapist from the University of Nottingham in 1999 and has since worked in various NHS trusts, most recently in the area of community rehabilitation. Clare spent 10-years working internationally as a physiotherapist with 4-years in Northern Iraq seeking to develop physiotherapy services. Her PhD (awarded in 2016) focused on the role of community-based group exercise programmes in supporting physical activity in older people. In 2019 Clare set up the BSc (Hons) Physiotherapy programme at the University of Hull which she now teaches on as a Reader in Physiotherapy. Her current research interests lie in compassionate pedagogy and person-centred practice.

## References

- Appleton-Knapp, S. L., & Krentler, K. A. (2006). Measuring student expectations and their effects on satisfaction: The importance of managing student expectations. *Journal of marketing education*, 28(3), 254-264.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0273475306293359>
- Austin, J., & Hickey, A. (2007). Autoethnography and teacher development. *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences*, 2(2), 369-378. [Austin\\_Hickey\\_Autoethnography\\_2007\\_PV.pdf](#)
- Barbour, R. S. (2001). Checklists for improving rigour in qualitative research: a case of the tail wagging the dog? *Bmj*, 322(7294), 1115-1117. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.322.7294.1115>
- Bates, E. A., & Kaye, L. K. (2013). "I'd be expecting caviar in lectures": the impact of the new fee regime on undergraduate students' expectations of Higher Education. *Higher Education*, 67(5), 655-673.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9671-3>
- Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2011). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (4th ed.). Open University Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Brownlee, J., Walker, S., Lennox, S., Exley, B., & Pearce, S. (2009). The first year university experience: using personal epistemology to understand effective learning and teaching in higher education. *Higher Education*, 58, 599-618.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-009-9212-2>
- Chand, R., Alasa, V., & Chand, R. D. (2022). "Humanizing" Pedagogies In Online Learning And Teaching-A Necessity In The Wake Of The Covid-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 6(10), 3713-3722.
- Chang, H. (2016). *Autoethnography as method*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315433370>
- Chung, S., Lount Jr, R. B., Park, H. M., & Park, E. S. (2018). Friends with performance benefits: A meta-analysis on the relationship between friendship and group performance. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 44(1), 63-79.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167217733069>
- Cifuentes Gomez, G., Guzmán, P., & Santelices, M. V. (2022). Transitioning to higher education: students' expectations and realities. *Educational Research*, 64(4), 424-439. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2022.2087712>
- Connell-Smith, A., & Hubble, S. (2018). *Widening participation strategy in higher education in England*. H. o. C. Library. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8204/CBP-8204.pdf>
- Cooper, R., & Lilyea, B. (2022). I'm interested in autoethnography, but how do I do it. *The qualitative report*, 27(1), 197-208. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5288>

- De Clercq, M., Parmentier, M., & Van Meenen, F. (2022). Fair enough?! Investigating the specific challenges of diverse university first-year students. *Research Papers in Education*, 39(1), 113-133.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2022.2089214>
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. (2000). Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed., pp. 733-768). Sage Publications.
- Erickson, B. L., Peters, C. B., & Strommer, D. W. (2009). *Teaching first-year college students*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Ghenghesh, P. (2018). Personal tutoring from the perspectives of tutors and tutees. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 42(4), 570-584. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1301409>
- Gibbs, G. (2010). *Dimensions of Quality*. T. H. E. Academy.  
<https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/ch/E4%20Dimensions%20of%20Quality.pdf>
- Gordon, N. A. (2016). *Issues in retention and attainment in Computer Science*. York: Higher Education Academy. HEA - report
- Harvey, L., Drew, S., & Smith, M. (2006). *The first-year experience: a review of literature for the Higher Education Academy*. H. E. Academy.  
<https://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/Harvey%20papers/Harvey%20and%20Drew%202006.pdf>
- Hayward, L., Ventura, S., Schuldt, H., & Donlan, P. (2018). Student pedagogical teams: Students as course consultants engaged in process of teaching and learning. *College Teaching*, 66(1), 37-47.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2017.1405904>
- Johnston, B. (2010). *The First Year At University: Teaching Students In Transition*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
- Killingback, C., Tomlinson, A., & Stern, J. (2024). Compassionate pedagogy in higher education: A scoping review. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 21(10). <https://10.53761/7yvrw787>
- Lake, J. (2015). Autoethnography and reflective practice: Reconstructing the doctoral thesis experience. *Reflective Practice*, 16(5), 677-687. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2015.1071247>
- Leaper, C. (2011). More similarities than differences in contemporary theories of social development?: A plea for theory bridging. *Advances in child development and behavior*, 40, 337-378.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-386491-8.00009-8>
- Lin, S., Mastrokourou, S., Longobardi, C., Bozzato, P., Gastaldi, F. G. M., & Berchiatti, M. (2022). Students' transition into higher education: The role of self-efficacy, regulation strategies, and academic achievements. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 77(1), 121-137. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12374>
- Meyer, K., & Willis, R. (2019). Looking back to move forward: The value of reflexive journaling for novice researchers. *Journal of gerontological social work*, 62(5), 578-585. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2018.1559906>
- Milem, J. F. (2003). The educational benefits of diversity: Evidence from multiple sectors. In M. J. Chang, D. Witt, J. Jones, & K. Hakuta (Eds.), *Compelling Interest*. Stanford University Press.
- Nash, J. K. (2002). Neighborhood effects on sense of school coherence and educational behavior in students at risk of school failure. *Children & Schools*, 24(2), 73-89. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/24.2.73>
- Nassar, M., Heinze, A., Jasimuddin, S. M., & Procter, C. (2022). Does students' satisfaction matter to faculty job satisfaction in higher education? *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 1-19.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2022.2149665>
- Office for Students. (2022). *Equality, diversity and student characteristics data*. O. f. Students.  
[https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/7137/ofs2022\\_29.pdf](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/7137/ofs2022_29.pdf)
- Owen, M. (2002). 'Sometimes You Feel You're in Niche Time' The Personal Tutor System, a Case Study. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 3(1), 7-23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787402003001002>
- Pelias, R. J. (2011). Writing Into Position. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (4th ed., pp. 659-668). SAGE Publications.
- Sacerdote, B. (2014). Experimental and quasi-experimental analysis of peer effects: two steps forward? *Annu. Rev. Econ.*, 6(1), 253-272. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-071813-104217>
- Song, J., & Taylor, P. C. (2005). Pure blue sky: A soulful autoethnography of chemistry teaching in China. *Reflective Practice*, 6(1), 141-163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462394042000326842>



- Thiemann, P. (2017). The persistent effects of short-term peer groups in higher education. *Institute of Labor Economics. The Persistent Effects of Short-Term Peer Groups in Higher Education*
- Thomas, L. (2013). What works? Facilitating an effective transition into higher education. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 14(1), 4-24. <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.14.S.4>
- Times Higher Education. (2016). *Times Higher Education University Workplace Survey 2016*.  
<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/university-workplace-survey-2016-results-and-analysis>
- Tohidinia, Z., & Haghighi, M. (2011). Predictors and outcomes of relationship quality: a guide for customer-oriented strategies. *Business Strategy Series*, 12(5), 242-256. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17515631111166889>
- Tomlinson, A., Simpson, A., & Killingback, C. (2023). Student expectations of teaching and learning when starting university: a systematic review. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 47(8) 1054-1073.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2023.2212242>
- Wall, S. (2008). Easier said than done: Writing an autoethnography. *International journal of qualitative methods*, 7(1), 38-53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690800700103>
- Westlake, C. (2008). *Predicting student withdrawal: examining the reasons through a preliminary literature review*.  
<http://hdl.voced.edu.au/10707/198354>
- Whittaker, R. (2008). *Quality Enhancement Themes: The First Year Experience*. T. Q. A. A. f. H. Education.  
<https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/11595/1/transition-to-and-during-the-first-year-3.pdf>
- Wigfield, A., & Eccles, J. S. (2000). Expectancy–value theory of achievement motivation. *Contemporary educational psychology*, 25(1), 68-81. <https://doi.org/10.1006/ceps.1999.1015>
- Winkler, I. (2018). Doing autoethnography: Facing challenges, taking choices, accepting responsibilities. *Qualitative inquiry*, 24(4), 236-247. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800417728956>
- Wong, W. H., & Chapman, E. (2023). Student satisfaction and interaction in higher education. *Higher Education*, 85(5), 957-978. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00874-0>
- Wootton, S. (2006). Changing practice in tutorial provision within post-compulsory education. *Personal tutoring in higher education*, 115-125.
- Worsley, J. D., Harrison, P., & Corcoran, R. (2021). Bridging the gap: exploring the unique transition from home, school or college into university. *Frontiers in public health*, 9, 634285. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2021.634285>
- Yale, A. T. (2019). The personal tutor–student relationship: student expectations and experiences of personal tutoring in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43(4), 533-544.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1377164>
- Yorke, M., & Longden, B. (2008). *The first-year experience of higher education in the UK*. York: Higher Education Academy, 68.  
[https://www.improvingthestudentexperience.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/FYE\\_in\\_HE\\_in\\_the\\_UK\\_FinalReport\\_Yorke\\_and\\_Longden.pdf](https://www.improvingthestudentexperience.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/FYE_in_HE_in_the_UK_FinalReport_Yorke_and_Longden.pdf)