



Understanding the needs of Modern Language degree students in transition to UK Higher Education: Reflections on a multi-agentic project at Cardiff University

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ABSTRACT

To better understand the challenges around transition to, through, and out of Higher Education (HE), the School of Modern Languages at Cardiff University undertook a 2-year project investigating multiple perspectives on transition to HE. The core of our strategy for supporting students through transition, their studies, and beyond into graduate employment is one of inclusivity. Understanding transition not just from an academic perspective but also seeking to understand the challenges students may face in terms of access to education, personal characteristics, and mental health must be undertaken through collaboration. In this project, we collaborated with secondary schools, Further Education colleges, university students, university staff, Widening Participation, charities, and third sector educational trusts.

This reflective analysis considers the project's findings in terms of quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Student admission, progression, and retention data over a 5-year period were mapped to student characteristics and analysed to gain greater understanding of the composition of the student body, and to identify trends in retention and progression. Using the quantitative data and existing research in transition to HE, the team devised questionnaires for university staff, university students, and teachers in schools and Further Education colleges. Reflecting on the data, this article will highlight that developing a shared understanding of learning expectations is essential to create independent and critical thinkers. The project illustrates that engaging with students to find out their needs and concerns in their first year of university is a fundamental step in supporting university staff to provide targeted, appropriate, and inclusive support.

Keywords: Inclusive transition, collaborative approaches to transition, bridging the gap in transition.

Introduction

Transition to Higher Education (HE) is known to be a critical moment in the academic journey (O'Donnell et al., 2016). The extent to which students develop a sense of belonging within the first weeks of university is crucial to progression and completion of studies (Meehan & Howells, 2018; Tate & Swords, 2013). The first year of study is fundamental in establishing attitudes to learning (Hussey & Smith, 2010). Supporting successful engagement and retention in education is person-centred, where belonging, interaction, support, engagement and pedagogy combine to create an environment that enables students to thrive in their discipline (Thomas, 2012, 2013; Tinto, 2017). The range of initiatives and activities to support students in transition is vast and multifaceted, and, to a great extent, shared across institutions internationally (Nutt & Calderon, 2009).

Understanding transition to HE as part of the first-year experience has become a key issue across disciplines (Carey et al., 2024). There is increased awareness of the need for a student-centred understanding, driven by practices around inclusion, support, and belonging in which data on retention and attrition can be contextualised rather than analysed in isolation (Beer & Lawson, 2017; Hillman, 2024; Thomas, 2013; Tinto, 2017; Trautwein & Bosse, 2017). Challenges students face in transition to HE are complex. Approaches to student support need to be holistic (Chan & Rose, 2023) and scaffolded (Hultberg et al., 2008). Transition can be enhanced through activities that bridge the gap between school and university through collaborative interventions and outreach initiatives (Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2014; Van Herpen et al., 2020) that encompass students' background (Bijsmans et al., 2025; Richardson et al., 2020), emotional wellbeing (Young et al., 2020), and academic expectations (Tate & Swords, 2013).

The experience of transition to HE is heterogenous and unique to a student's lived experience, expectations, and personal epistemological beliefs (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006; Brownlee et al., 2009). Students' expectations are influenced by their own prior learning experiences, and the experiences or perceptions of HE held by family members and friends. If the reality a student encounters at university differs from these expectations, then the student may find it more challenging to transition into university life and learning (Cifuentes Gomez et al., 2022; Guzman et al., 2021). High academic achievement in secondary school and successful self-regulation in learning strategies are linked to a strong sense of self-efficacy (Lin et al., 2023). Students who have not developed self-regulation in learning and who do not have a strong sense of self-efficacy need to be supported to develop these skills at university. Learning and teaching curricula that integrate and scaffold the development of self-efficacy and self-regulation alongside academic learning better accommodate a wide range of prior experiences to create an inclusive and accessible learning environment (Hitch et al., 2019; Hultberg et al., 2008; Hussey & Smith, 2010; Jones et al., 2025). UK degree programmes in international languages offer a wide range of entry pathways that accommodate advanced learners, heritage speakers, and novice language learners; therefore it is essential to support all learners to develop academic and professional skills alongside discipline-specific learning (Harnisch et al., 2011).

This article reflects on a project to better understand students' needs in HE, particularly for degrees in international languages. After introducing the context and design of the study, this article will reflect on the project's findings and their significance in understanding transition as a holistic and inclusive process.

Context

Learner identity and motivation are tightly bound in language acquisition (Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009) and the skill set that is developed in a language degree is culturally rich and highly interdisciplinary. In addition to language mastery, intercultural communication is a key graduate skill for which students need to develop knowledge of the history, culture, and society of the language(s) they are learning. Establishing the interdisciplinary skill set and intellectual curiosity necessary for a language degree is an important part of transition, to ensure all students develop interdisciplinary understanding (Schijf et al., 2025). A student's self-concept as a language student and their ability to project their future self as a part of the community of language speakers is key to motivation. For transition to HE to be successful, language programmes need to understand, foster, and promote the development of an ideal future second-language self (Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2014). The role of positive self-concept in developing academic self-efficacy in language learning in turn supports student

progression in their first year (Mendoza et al., 2022). Thus, establishing a strong sense of belonging (Gilani & Thomas, 2025; Meehan & Howells, 2019; Thomas, 2012) and becoming (Gravett & Winstone, 2021; Pollard & Bamford, 2022) within the first weeks of university is critical to establishing a sense of learner identity as part of the international linguistic and cultural community, and a reconceptualising of self within the new HE environment (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006; Briggs et al., 2012; Brownlee et al., 2009; Cifuentes Gomez et al., 2022; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2025).

The Project

This Reflective Analysis reports on a 2-year project undertaken by a team of lecturers, students, and data analysts in the School of Modern Languages (MLANG), Cardiff University, between July 2023 and July 2025. Ethical approval was sought and granted by the Chair of the School of Modern Languages Research Ethics Committee.

The aim of the project was to better understand our students' experiences of transition to university learning and teaching, and to inform MLANG policy by suggesting appropriate, targeted, and meaningful ways to support students (Mahoney et al., 2022).

The project investigated the different entry pathways to undergraduate studies in MLANG in terms of engagement, progression, and retention through analysis of student data from 2018 to 2023. The project supported statistical data with a range of questionnaires to students, staff, and teachers in secondary and tertiary education. These were followed up with a student focus group and a multi-sectoral conference that included a round table event with school and college teachers. The findings from the different sources were investigated and discussed with the student interns in the team, then used to suggest implementable action points for MLANG. The project report was circulated within Cardiff University and has been used as part of the development of a university-wide response to supporting students in transition to HE (Federici et al., 2025).

Study Design

This project adopted a mixed methods approach to understanding the student demographic and how MLANG can best support them by focusing on these areas:

- What is the demographic make-up of MLANG?
- Which groups are at a higher risk of withdrawing from studies?
- To what extent do students feel prepared for the differences between school/college and HE?
- How is that preparation perceived by students/academic staff/school and college teachers?
- How can MLANG better prepare students for academic studies before they arrive?
- What are the key areas of concern for students when commencing University?
- How can MLANG support students in these areas?

To understand the characteristics and demographics within our student body, we analysed anonymised quantitative data. These data allowed us to consider intersections between retention and student characteristics, and the extent to which our findings mapped to research. As quantitative data alone cannot capture the rich complexity of student characteristics and needs, we sought qualitative input to gain a fuller understanding of factors that influence success in transition (Young et al., 2020). The second phase was to

develop questionnaires to understand perceptions of transition to HE from the perspectives of our students, staff, and secondary schools. Involving multiple perspectives in our analysis enabled us to develop a holistic panorama of transition (Briggs et al., 2012). To ensure the student perspective was embedded in the project, we successfully applied for internal funding to work with two undergraduate students as paid student interns.

Reflections on Student Data

The report individually and thematically analysed progression data (withdrawal, transfer, repeat, and absence (Interruption of Studies) rates) for Year 1 and Year 2 students spanning 2018 to 2023. These data were mapped against student admissions data including contextual markers. The analysis was then shared with our student interns to further inform the discussion through lived experience as MLANG students.

The student characteristics with lower rates of progression can be grouped into thematic areas: awareness of discipline through prior study; transition and personal characteristics; and student domicile.

Awareness of Discipline through Prior Study

Attainment in pre-university entry examinations, has long been identified as an indicator of success in HE (Kipuru et al., 2024; Sear, 1983; Van Rooij et al., 2018; Zanini & Vidal Rodeiro, 2014). In the UK, these are Level 3 A Level qualifications (or equivalent) that are graded A-E. Universities establish an entry requirement to be accepted on a degree programme. For MLANG, the degree entry requirement is ABB to BBC at A level. Our data supports the link between pre-university attainment and success at university. Students who met or exceeded the entry qualification had higher rates of progression. There was a progression rate of 93% for students achieving the top grade (A) in three A levels. Conversely, we found lower rates of progression for students who did not meet the entry qualification, with a progression rate of 59% for students achieving three grade C results at A Level. Students whose results are lower than the course entry requirement arrived through grade softening or clearing. Grade softening refers to a pre-agreed flexibility of entry requirements and clearing is the process by which students can apply for degree programmes for a limited time after the A level results day in August. Clearing supports students who may have changed their mind about their preferred degree programme, did not meet their conditional offer, or who did not meet the initial application deadlines. During 2018-2023, approximately one third of undergraduates arrived in MLANG through clearing. In addition to lower progression, students whose results were lower than the course requirement also had higher rates of transfer in year 1 (7%) and of repeating year 1 (9%).

Our data shows that students with an A-level matching their degree course are more likely to progress, with a 5% withdrawal rate. Subject-specific learning strategies, cultural awareness, and metalinguistic skills through prior study support students in progression. *Ab initio* students, who have not learnt the language(s) they are studying in their degree programme, have lower progression rates and an 11% withdrawal rate.

Readiness for international study appears to play a role in internal transfer rates. Most transfers in the first and second year of the degree programme are internal. Transfer rates in year 2 do not seem to indicate a link to academic achievement, with a 7% transfer rate for AAA students, a 15% transfer rate for BBB students, and a 9% transfer rate for CCC students. MLANG offers two four-year programmes with a mandatory year abroad and one three-year programme without a year abroad. Transfers occur between

these programmes, with students changing their original choices by adding/removing the year abroad. A year abroad is an important milestone in UK language degrees. Literature on international student mobility identifies life and learning abroad as a key transition (Coertjens et al., 2017; Ecochard & Fotheringham, 2017; Ellis et al., 2024; Hao et al., 2024; Li & Shen, 2025; Ploner, 2018). Studies concerning the international placements centre around efficacy and equity (Kang & Shively, 2024), language acquisition (Higuchi et al., 2023; Ovchinnikova et al., 2024; Tseng et al., 2024). Studies on transition for international study remain an important source of guidance on how UK language degrees should prepare students in transition from UK life and academic study to gain confidence in understanding the expectations of life and study in their destinations on the Year Abroad. Given the transfer rates between programmes in year 2, we suggest more research is needed into how institutions support language students in the first year of study to increase preparedness for the year abroad and awareness of what the experience will entail.

Transition and Personal Characteristics

Language degree programmes continue to attract more female students. This is a trend noted over many decades and was historically linked to perceived and unsubstantiated notions of aptitude in language learning (Sunderland, 2000). Despite notions of gendered aptitude not being reflected in performance, language learning in the UK continues to see a significantly higher percentage of female students. This gender gap is known in language study, from age 14, when UK pupils choose their subjects for their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), onwards more female pupils than male pupils choose to study languages, with over double the number of girls entering GCSE language examinations (Mills & Tinsley, 2020). This gender gap is present in our data: in the data analysed 662 of the students identified as female and 328 identified as male. It can also be seen in Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data: Language and Area Studies attracted 58,080 female students and 21,305 male students in the academic years 2014/15 to 2023/24 (HESA, 2025). Student intake is indicative of the UK gap in language learning but during the first year of university, our data shows male students are more likely to withdraw, having a retention rate of 63% compared to 75% among female students. Key points of gender disparity in retention are withdrawal in the first year (F:7%, M: 10%), repetition of the first year (F:1%, M:4%) and internal transfer in the second year (F:9%, M:14%).

Our data also showed that mature students (over 21, in Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) data) are a significant minority accounting for only 7% of the student body over the 5-year period. Mature students are significantly more likely to withdraw in their first year (19% withdrawal rate), but progression rates settle after the first year for this population.

Contextual markers or flags are generated by data on student admissions forms and enable universities to understand any challenges or personal circumstances that may have an impact on students' learning or performance in examinations (UCAS, 2025). These include postcode-derived data (POLAR4, the indexes of multiple deprivation, Department of Work and Pensions data on household income), data on school league tables and rates of students receiving free school meals, care-experienced status, refugee status. Our data indicated that students coming to university with contextual admissions were more likely to withdraw in their first year than students who did not have contextual admissions, with retention rates of 66%, compared to 72% for students with no contextual flags. The Widening Participation crisis that is having a devastating impact in England (Muradás-Taylor, 2023) is also visible in Wales. Recent decisions to close

Modern Language degree programmes across the UK (Bowler, 2025) leading to ‘cold spots’ for language degrees across the country (Muradás-Taylor & Taylor, 2024) have the greatest impact on students with contextual markers, who do not have the possibility to move to a different part of the country to study for a language degree for financial, social, or personal reasons and responsibilities. Inequalities continue to persist in HE (Richardson et al., 2020) and inequalities of opportunity create risk for certain student characteristics (OfS, 2025).

Student Domicile

Outcomes by fee status and domicile were analysed to understand data related to our student demographic. Regarding overseas students, in the period covered by the data, there was a total of 21 overseas students, compared to 975 home students. Of those 21, 4 withdrew in the first year, one transferred in the first year, and two transferred in Year 2. HESA data for domiciled address by subject studied (HESA, 2025) indicate that Language and Area Studies, particularly at undergraduate level, are not traditional areas of recruitment for international students.

Regarding UK domicile, in the period analysed, 752 students were domiciled in England, 165 in Wales, 3 in Scotland, and 14 in Northern Ireland. The number of students from Scotland and Northern Ireland are too small to be statistically significant. The progression rates for English students was 73%, above the base outcome (71%). In the sample, Welsh students had the lowest overall progression rate (62%), significantly below the base outcomes. Welsh students had high withdrawal rates in Year 1 (Wales 12%, England 7%) and in Year 2 (Wales 5%, England 3%). The anonymised admissions data did not provide the granularity to cross-reference outcomes by domicile and contextual flags; we identify further research in this area as crucial to ensure institutions are effectively supporting their local communities.

Reflections on the analysis of participant views

Three questionnaires were developed thematically with a mirroring approach so that the responses could be compared across all populations. Questionnaires were sent to MLANG students (henceforth students questionnaire), one round in April 2024 and one in November 2024 to capture views from different cohorts and at different times of the academic year, MLANG teaching staff (henceforth staff questionnaire), and schools and colleges that offer language study to A level (henceforth schools questionnaire). Questionnaires were designed containing a range of question types including closed questions, ranking questions, and open-ended questions to build a strong profile of views that could be analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The questionnaires asked participants to think specifically about the process of transition into HE, focusing on the nexus between preparation for HE and navigation of HE in the first few weeks of the first year.

Questionnaires are frequently used to understand student perceptions of transition, with large-scale data, small-scale qualitative studies, and longitudinal studies (Blair, 2017; Bowles et al., 2014; Meehan & Howells, 2018, 2019; Schijf et al., 2025). Some studies also take a wider view, using questionnaires and other data gathering with schools and colleges (Briggs et al., 2012). The role and influence of academic staff on students’ transition to HE is noted throughout the literature (Carey et al., 2024; Harvey et al., 2006; Kahu et al., 2020) and many studies seek to understand transition from the perspective of their own students’ experiences or by presenting case studies from a range of disciplines (Kift, 2009; O’Donnell et al., 2016).

Our project is small scale, but broad, in order to capture views across different groups. Our student questionnaires had 56 responses across two rounds; our staff questionnaire had 29 responses; our schools questionnaire had 27 responses.

Data gathered in this part of the project intended to provide insight into the views and perceptions of all groups involved in the transition process. These different insights enabled us to identify differences in perceptions of transition, and to create an evidence-based action plan, attuned to the needs of students, staff, and schools raised in the questionnaire responses.

The questionnaires were supplemented by a small-scale focus group for students, a multi-agency conference that included a roundtable discussion with teachers from schools and colleges and engagement with organisations that support students towards HE, including third sector organisations, secondary schools, FE colleges, charities, and Widening Participation. These extensive consultations enabled us to present transition to HE as a multi-agentic journey and to support increasing awareness of the support available to students and the expectations of transition to HE across all groups.

The broad themes covered in the three questionnaires are:

- Perceptions of preparedness for university life and learning.
- Perceptions of aptitude in the transition to university life and learning.
- Perceptions of engagement in the transition to university life and learning.
- Perceptions of support during the transition to university life and learning.

Reflections on our key findings are presented in the following subsections.

Perceptions of preparedness for university life and learning

Perceptions of what is considered preparation for HE varies considerably across the categories of respondents who participated in our questionnaire and in our conference. Schools and colleges invest significantly in preparing students for university in terms of support for open days, guidance on completing application forms, opportunities to engage in field trips, outreach activities, and university taster sessions and talks, 89% of respondents in the schools questionnaire felt they prepared students for HE and academic study. This preparation is fundamental for learners beginning to construct their identity as soon-to-be university students. However, our roundtable noted that HE is just one option school-leavers can choose: schools cannot focus exclusively on HE preparation, and need to support students leaving school for work, apprenticeships, and other training routes. The roundtable also highlighted gaps in provision, with a need for HEIs to ensure outreach is inclusive and to create greater links with specialist education provisions within mainstream schools. Student questionnaire responses suggest that students do feel prepared by schools (82% feel prepared), but free-text comments indicate that moving from learning about or preparing for HE and the reality of starting university creates concerns.

In terms of preparedness, we were particularly interested in how respondents perceive independent studies. The shift from guided learning and exam-heavy content for A level and the independent and autonomous learning expectations at university is a culture shock (Briggs et al., 2012; Williams & Roberts, 2023). Schools and colleges are doing what they can, and our student data indicates most students (80%+) are aware before they arrive that independent learning is a big part of university studies. However, when

asked to reflect on their first few weeks, students did not feel prepared for the difference (Tate & Swords, 2013), with 50% of the November respondents stating that they felt underprepared. In the April iteration of the student questionnaire, however, this figure changed considerably, with 54% reporting they felt prepared and 25% reporting they felt underprepared. This suggests that the liminality of entering a new learning environment is transitory and students begin to gain confidence within the second half of their first year (Lizzio & Wilson, 2013). Continued support and scaffolding is needed for students to successfully adapt to independent and autonomous learning, self-directed research, and intellectual growth. Students' concept of independent learning and ability to navigate academic conventions varies considerably. A key action point from the project was to support students in understanding and engaging with independent learning skills. Working with student and academic support departments across the university, we developed three points of action. We linked all of our assessment briefs to the relevant university-wide academic skills training courses. We devised and ran a staff workshop to consider the range of independent learning activities expected of students. We discussed which skills may not be evident to students and how we can explicitly include development of these skills in teaching and learning. Based on the staff workshop, we developed a first-year student workshop in collaboration with in-house digital education experts. This workshop offered students an opportunity to consider the different types of proactive learning expected at university, showcased the support and study-skills training available in the university, and suggested digital technologies that can support key areas of independent study. We focused on academic concerns identified in the student questionnaire free-text comments: planning, organization, time management, note-taking and revising, and reflecting on learning. These skills are not explicitly taught, but students are implicitly expected to develop them. As such, they form part of the 'hidden curriculum', the unspoken expectations of learning in HE. By demystifying academic expectations and practices, students can engage more readily and understand better what is expected of them (Blundell-Birtill et al., 2024; Kärner & Schneider, 2024; Koutsouris et al., 2021).

Perceptions of aptitude in the transition to university life and learning

Aptitude can be considered as the ability, prior learning, behavioural characteristics, success, and persistence of learning (Van Rooij et al., 2018): students who perform well in school, are shown to maintain their high performance at university (OFS, 2022; Sear, 1983; Tate & Swords, 2013; Zanini & Vidal Rodeiro, 2014). However, we viewed perceptions of aptitude through a wider lens encompassing not only the academic but also the social and cultural dimensions of university study (Hussey & Smith, 2010). Considering aptitude as holistic and person-based, we understand that aptitude is more than 'will I do well', and encompasses other more identity-based questions like 'will I fit in', 'will I make friends', 'will there be other people like me', 'am I the kind of person who goes to university'? Through the project's engagement with disability charities, third sector organisations, and Widening Participation, the notion of belonging as a determinant for building a sense of aptitude for study came to the fore. Creating an inclusive sense of belonging to an institution, course, module, and social group are fundamental in supporting students in developing their self-concept as a valued member of a community of learners. This is particularly true for students with contextual markers or entering HE through Widening Participation (Featherstone et al., 2023; Haywood et al., 2024; Hillman, 2024; Hitch et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2025; Richardson et al., 2020). In this area, our conference and roundtable highlighted that inclusivity in transition can be increased if academic departments ensure their outreach provision is reaching everyone who may benefit from it, including

non-mainstream provision. The student questionnaire free-text comments indicate that students are concerned about their aptitude at 'being a student'. Concerns mentioned were living away from home, fitting in, making friends, fear of loneliness, struggling socially, self-advocacy, coping with study, understanding technology, managing their time, and fear of whether or not they would enjoy their course. The project increased staff awareness of the range of issues that may have an impact on student performance. In the staff questionnaire, concerns were raised around students' struggle to balance social and academic life, and students' ability to manage their time, particularly for those students who need to work in order to pay for their studies. These concerns were raised in the context of how HEIs can better support the impact of these factors on students' mental health. Aptitude in assessment was raised as a concern in the staff survey: 52% believing students have limited awareness of how assessments link to their overall learning and development of graduate skills, 10% believing students are aware of these links, and 31% believing students have no awareness. MLANG has worked on developing assessment formats that foster belonging – both to a community of learners and to the language-speaking communities of the languages they are studying. This has been achieved through rethinking assessment processes to ensure that assessments are mapped to graduate and transferrable skills development, have purposeful and authentic outcomes, and allow for personalisation of the task. By empowering students' self-concept as belonging to a community of language learners and speakers through assessments, we can support students' sense of aptitude toward the discipline.

Perceptions of engagement in the transition to university life and learning

Engagement in learning and academic studies in the first weeks of university is critical to progression (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Kahu et al., 2020). Seen more broadly, engagement underpins students' sense of belonging, connectedness, and relationships with peers and staff (Thomas, 2012), in which academic engagement supports the creation of a sense of belonging. Our questionnaires looked at opportunities and areas of engagement in the transitions process, particularly how students engage in the transition activities provided by schools and university outreach.

That engagement is not just academic, but also social (Thomas, 2012, 2013) was particularly evident in our data from schools. Looking at engagement in the process of transition to HE, MLANG's highly active and successful outreach initiatives as a key aspect in cross-sector engagement, notably through student mentoring and ambassador work. Schools and colleges have limited time and budget to engage in on-campus transition activities, therefore opportunities for outreach activities where students come to schools are highly valued. Outreach, particularly student mentoring, are excellent opportunities for engagement in the journey towards HE both for participating schools and for university students (Blake & Gorrara, 2019). Mentoring and outreach of this kind enables students to build on their sense of belonging to a discipline, able to inspire younger learners towards further study. Peer mentoring is used in many institutions to foster belonging and engagement particularly during the first-year transition (Chester et al., 2013; Foy & Keane, 2018).

Areas of concern in engagement in the process of transition were identified: certain groups shown in our admissions data as more likely to withdraw from studies, are not involved in the opportunities for engagement in the process of transition from schools to university. These are students who arrive through the UK clearing system, as discussed above, and mature students. Our admissions data show that mature students have much higher rates of withdrawal from or interruption of studies, particularly during the first

year. Mature students have a 19% withdrawal rate in year 1, compared to a 7% withdrawal rate for students aged 18-21. One of our reflections to take forward is whether engagement in the process of transition can be seen as an important factor in retention.

The experiences of transition are known to present additional challenges in 'non-traditional' student groups (Gill, 2021; Rawlings Smith et al., 2022). 'Traditional' students, progressing from secondary or further education into HE, engage with the process of transition to their chosen university gradually, and with support of their school/college. Students' creation of a 'sense of purpose' as part of the transition process, developing their sense of identity as a student, and their psychological and academic fit for the institution and academic discipline, which have a critical role in the transition into HE (Lizzio & Wilson, 2010).

The experience of mature students remains an important area of study in the transition to HE (Fragoso et al., 2013; Reay, 2002; Richardson, 1994). Mature students have different motivations for entering HE (McCune et al., 2010). Entering HE is an investment in personal and social transformation (Saddler & Sundin, 2020). The diversity, life experience, and different perspectives mature students bring to a student cohort enriches the learning experience for all; however, mature students experience difficulties in adjusting to a return to learning due to their commitments outside study (Busher & James, 2019) and perceptions of normative values of student identity (Gregersen & Nielsen, 2023). Though networks and access pathways are available to support mature students, free-text comments in the student questionnaire suggest that mature students experience anxiety and difficulties in courses where mature students are a significant minority highlighting the need for mechanisms that support social integration and an inclusive sense of belonging (Gill, 2021).

Students arriving through clearing presents different challenges at personal, social, and academic levels. Clearing offers an opportunity for learners from all pathways to apply for remaining spaces on university courses in the UK shortly before they commence and is an increasingly viable post-qualifications route to HE (Hewitt, 2021). Clearing offers an opportunity for A-level entrants who missed the grades they needed for their chosen course to apply for courses at other universities or for courses in different disciplines. There is little research into the issues of identity, self-concept, and anxiety experienced by students arriving through clearing (Baxter & Hatt, 2000) or how institutions and academic staff can support students coming to a university or course that was not their first choice to build a sense of belonging within their discipline. There is a question, therefore, around how HEIs can better support learners arriving through clearing, who did not participate in offer-holder days and other preparatory activities, to develop the same engagement and belonging as students who have spent a year developing their psychological and academic fit in preparation for arrival at their chosen HEI.

The wide range of clubs, talks, and social activities offered by MLANG provides opportunities for informal engagement with staff and students across academic years, creating a strong sense of community and engagement. Student questionnaire data indicated that finding out about the year abroad was a concern (37% did not know how to access help, 35% were neutral), and free-text comments mentioned the year abroad as a concern. As a result, MLANG has introduced language-specific inter-year staff/student social events that gave first- and second-year students the opportunity to chat informally to students who had completed the year abroad.

Perceptions of support during the transition to university life and learning

To understand how students engage with the educational interface (Kahu & Nelson, 2018), we sought students' views on access to academic, career, personal, and wellbeing support. HEIs are well-equipped in these areas, however, in their first few weeks of university, students are not yet proficient in navigating the new resources independently. Students continued to seek advice from family and friends from home and were unsure on who to ask for help (39%). Liminality and uncertainty of support mechanisms raise anxiety. Awareness of how to access mental health support during transition is crucial (Cage et al., 2021; Cage & McManemy, 2022) and impacts students' completion of their first year (Duffy et al., 2020), the student questionnaires indicated that 40% of participants were unaware of where to go for support for mental health and wellbeing. As an outcome of the project, we have introduced short presentations informing students of all the avenues of support available to them. These presentations contain links to support information and are present in all of our modules. Lecturers present the information at the start of semesters, and also mid-way through semesters. Student support colleagues have introduced drop-in Q&A sessions to our Welcome Week and organize regular events to raise awareness of the support available to students. By increasing visibility of support, we are raising student and staff awareness of the support available and by increasing informal opportunities for staff and students to interact, we increase approachability, which may increase students' confidence in reaching out to staff if they need support.

A separate MLANG initiative, aligned with the transitions project, was the reconceptualization of first year induction week. MLANG removed the traditional information-heavy induction programme in favour of a 'welcome week' with introductions to key staff, social opportunities across academic years, a languages celebration event with games and activities, and a scavenger hunt. These activities offered informal opportunities to meet staff and other students across languages, discover the local area, and ask questions about the course. These activities help create a sense of community and belonging across the school. Presenting course information, such as assessment procedures and policies, study skills, academic regulations and course overviews, before students begin the course can be overwhelming and students may struggle to recall the information when they come to need it. This important information is available to all students from the start of the course, but training and discussion are now delivered within modules and through timetabled workshops throughout the academic year. The sessions coincide with points in the academic calendar when students first need to engage with these policies and practices at point of need. Organising workshops that are timely, targeted, and pertinent to students' learning journey, supports students to understand the training in the context of their own learning. Students can concretely apply the training to their individual needs, so concerns can be addressed and support organised.

Concluding reflections

Understanding transition not just from an academic perspective but also seeking to understand the challenges students may face in access to education, personal characteristics, and mental health must be undertaken through cross-sector collaboration. The economic situation, the ongoing impact of Covid-19, changes in social interactions, the surge in technology use, and the increasing stress of tuition fees are changing the kind of support HEIs need to offer (Muradás-Taylor, 2023; Pollard & Bamford, 2022). The core of our strategy for supporting students through transition is inclusivity. The key terms that echo throughout literature on transitions to HE – belonging and engagement – are also fundamental to inclusive design (Gulko et al., 2024; Hubbard, 2024; Rawlings Smith et al., 2022).

Through the project we have sought an inclusive understanding of the variety of pathways to HE, and students' perceptions of their experiences of transition. Looking at the first-year experience through the lenses of different groups enabled us to identify key areas for development and enabled us to give voice to the priorities, views, and concerns across the groups. The project successfully brought together a wide range of stakeholders invested in inclusive transition to HE. Through this collaboration new partnerships, networks, and research projects between different stakeholders have begun. By taking this holistic approach and multi-agentic consultation, what started as a school-wide project has reached beyond initial expectations, facilitated new networks and informed university strategy for transition to HE.

Biography

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