



Student transition to university: Taking a needs based approach

Gareth Hughes, UK

ABSTRACT

Student transition to university can be psychologically and emotionally challenging and has often been positioned in the literature as a unique phenomenon, unlike any other experience. This article considers whether this is such a unique experience or whether it shares common aspects with other episodes in life. Whether there are underlying mechanisms to all transitions which make them particularly challenging and if so if this may lead to further insight and understanding. It does this by considering transition through the lens of a needs theory (Human Givens Theory) as a way to explain the challenges of all transitions and the transition to university in particular. The article then considers the implications of this approach and what benefits it may bring to understanding student transition to university.

Keywords: student transition, human given, needs theory

Introduction

Student transition to university has often been positioned in the literature as a unique phenomenon, unlike any other experience (e.g. Worsley, et al., 2021). Partly as a consequence of the perceived uniqueness of this experience, the process of transition has often been seen to be psychologically and emotionally challenging and potentially stressful (Thompson, et al., 2021; Richardson, et al., 2012). It appears it is not unusual for students to experience higher levels of psychological distress, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, a reduction in self-esteem and isolation (Thompson, et al., 2021; Gravett & Winstone, 2021; Harris, 2019; Fisher & Hood, 1987). Some research suggests that student wellbeing may decline on entry to university and not return to pre-university baselines for many months (Bewick, et al., 2010; Palmer, et al., 2009; Conley, et al., 2020). In addition, it is clear that the challenges of transition are not felt or experienced equally. Mature students, racialised or global majority students, LGBTQ+ students and students from what may be considered 'non-traditional' backgrounds report higher levels of distress and lower levels of belonging and integration (Pence & Ulusoy, 2023; Parker, et al., 2017; Pennington, et al., 2018; Harvey, et al., 2006).

This is important for a number of reasons. The experiences a student has during the transition period appear to significantly influence future wellbeing and academic success (Tinto, 2003; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Postareff, et al., 2017). Transition experiences seem to have long term effects on student behaviour, socialisation and self-efficacy and there also appears to be a relationship between early withdrawal and transition (Palmer, et al., 2009; Kleiber, et al., 2018).

The nature and apparent scale of these challenges mean that approaches to transition have frequently positioned the experience as something to be survived and overcome (Young & Bunting, 2024). That it is a

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barrier through which students must travel in order to become fully fledged, successful and thriving members of the university community (Wilbrahim, et al., 2024; Worsley, et al., 2021). Interventions provided by universities have consequently focused on minimising negative experiences and seeking to quickly equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge to thrive in the new university environment (Van Herpen, et al., 2020; Hill, et al., 2018; Thomas, 2012). Transition, in this vision, becomes a potential bridge to academic success and community belonging, but one which is challenging to cross. Of note, is that much of this work isolates consideration of transition within the particular environment of the university – its practices, cultures, communities and expectations.

However, taking a wider perspective there are broader questions to ask about some of the assumptions underlying this approach to the transition into university. First is whether this is such a unique experience or whether it is an experience that shares common aspects with other episodes in life. Research shows that other transitions also pose psychological and emotional challenges – including moving home, changing jobs, changing careers, the end of relationships, becoming a parent and retirement (Cheung & Wong, 2022; Coppola & Young, 2022; Whisman, et al., 2022; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020; Dang, et al., 2022). In fact, the human experience is one of constant transition as even our own bodies change and age. So well understood is this link between change and wellbeing that one of the common measures of stress is based upon how many significant life changes have occurred in the previous twelve months (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). If student transition and its challenges are considered in this wider context of other life transitions, might it allow more learning both for university staff and students?

Pursuing this line of thought, it may be worth considering whether there are underlying mechanisms to all transitions which make them particularly challenging. If so, these commonalities may shed further light on why the transition to university is so difficult for so many students and why it can have such lasting effects, offering greater insight and opportunities to better target interventions. This in turn raises an additional possibility – if there are broader lessons to be learned about the challenges transition poses in life generally, could the transition into university be used to explicitly equip students with learning that allows them to more successfully navigate subsequent transitions with fewer challenges and impacts on wellbeing?

To explore these questions this article briefly explores the challenges within current existing theories of student transition before applying a particular theoretical lens (needs theory approach) in an abductive process to test it for fit and explanatory power. To carry out this narrative exploration, a detailed literature search was performed to examine the theory's key claims against current evidence in the field of student transition. Building on these findings, abductive reflection was used to identify potential implications, learning and limitations.

Theoretical approach

One of the challenging aspects of the study of university transition is that such a wide variety of issues seem to be important and very varied and apparently unrelated interventions have been shown to lead to improvement (Cage, et al., 2021; Wilbrahim, et al., 2024; Thompson, et al., 2021; Harvey, 2006). Transition is affected by academic preparation, social circumstances, quality of accommodation, self-perception,

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academic discipline, disability, demographics and on and on. This makes it difficult to provide an overarching narrative explaining the process and experience of transition and why it can be so challenging for some (O'Donnell, et al., 2016). As a consequence, there are a variety of competing theoretical ideas seeking to explain the transition to university (Young & Bunting, 2024; Tinto, 2003; Kift, 2015).

One theoretical approach to this has been to posit that new students must be able to find a range of experience and sustenance from their new university environment. Young and Bunting (2024), for example, suggest that students must feel part of their community, be able to meaningfully participate in university life and navigate an ongoing psychosocial process of 'becoming,' in which they move from periphery to full members of their institution.

These theories echo evidence advanced within broader 'needs theories' emerging from disciplines such as health, psychology and philosophy (Seligman, 2011; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Griffin & Tyrrell, 2024; Glasser, 1985) While these theories take differing views as to exactly which needs are most important and why, they share an underlying assumption (Griffin & Tyrrell, 2024). This posits that all living things require sustenance from the external environment in order to grow, flourish, maintain health and reproduce. For example, flowers require nutrition from the soil, hydration, sunlight and interaction with pollinating insects– these we might consider to be the flower's 'needs'. Humans, as more complex living organisms, have a more complex range of needs. These include physical needs: food, hydration, sleep, shelter, sunlight etc. and psychological needs which include emotional and social needs. If these needs are reasonably well met, then people are more likely to be healthy and to flourish. If needs are not met in a healthy balance, then the person is likely to experience a range of distress in response – partly as a functional drive to motivate them to take action to better meet their needs - e.g. the feeling of loneliness is a motivator to engage more with other people to meet social needs (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008).

A needs-based approach to all transitions would suggest that they can be challenging because they disrupt the ways in which the person is able to meet their needs. Old ways of meeting needs may no longer work, while new ways have yet to be developed. This, in turn can create higher levels of emotional distress and concomitant negative experiences which may then cause additional difficulties. This has obvious implications for new students entering the new environment of a university while possibly leaving old environments and networks behind.

Needs and wellbeing

Needs theories sit within a range of explanations of what leads to good wellbeing. Fletcher (2016a; 2016b) summarises these explanations as belonging to four philosophical approaches to human wellbeing; hedonism, desire-based approaches, objective list-based approaches and perfectionist/teleological approaches. Most needs theories combine the objective list-based approach (this list of things is required for wellbeing) and the perfectionist/teleological approach (human beings thrive when they fulfil their human-ness). In other words, needs theories argue that we are able to be healthy and flourish because we are meeting the basic underlying needs that define what it is to be human (or that humans have evolved to need). The challenge to these approaches is why we should accept any particular list of needs as being definitive – why those specific things and not others (Fletcher, 2016a)? Indeed, any examination of the history of needs theories in psychology, philosophy and health will reveal competing lists and ideas.

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Within psychology, Maslow’s theory of needs is probably the best known of this family of theories – often known as the Hierarchy of Needs, although Maslow himself was dubious about the existence of any hierarchy and disliked the pyramid that is often used to explain his ideas (De Bruyckere, et al., 2015). More recent psychology-based needs theories generally accept that there is no good evidence for a hierarchy and that instead we need to seek a healthy balance in the way we meet all of our genuine needs (Griffin & Tyrrell, 2024; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Research has helped to bring some clarity to which needs may be important to wellbeing, flourishing and health – although this hasn’t prevented differences in the lists of needs being presented. For example, self-determination theory, Glasser’s reality theory, positive psychology’s PERMA model and the 5 ways to wellbeing present differing lists all of which claim an evidence base (Seligman, 2011; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Glasser, 1985; NEF, 2008).

Table 1 Needs Theories

Self-determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985)	Reality theory (Glasser, 1985)	Positive Psychology (Seligman, 2011)	Five Ways to Wellbeing (NEF, 2008)
Relatedness	Love and belonging	Relationships	Connect
Autonomy	Freedom	Engagement	Be active
Competence	Power	Accomplishment	Keep learning
	Fun	Positive emotion	Take notice
	Survival	Meaning	Give

However, closer scrutiny of the explanations offered, in the literature, for each item on these lists, suggests that the overlaps between them may be greater than they first appear. It could be argued that what self-determination theory calls ‘relatedness,’ reality theory calls ‘love and belonging,’ positive psychology calls ‘relationships’ and the five ways to wellbeing calls ‘connect,’ are in fact roughly the same phenomenon. There are similar overlaps between ‘competence,’ ‘power’ and ‘accomplishment.’ While the overlaps are not perfect and some items only appear on one list, this does suggest greater homogeneity and that perhaps some of the differences represent variations in language, approach and philosophy rather than actual differences in conclusions as to what people need.

A different approach to understanding what people need is to look at longitudinal studies that track those things that appear to determine good health, wellbeing and life longevity over time (Abrams, 2023; Vaillant, 2008; O’Conner, et al, 2025). A number of studies have been and are continuing to be conducted in a range of countries that track a group of participants throughout their life and identify those things strongly associated with health, wellbeing and longevity. These studies have identified physical factors that can influence future outcomes such as diet, exercise, alcohol, nicotine and drug consumption, etc. and some of the factors identified by the psychological theories above including meaning and purpose, feeling part of a community, close relationships, competence, perceived social value and feeling safe (Abrams, 2023; Vaillant, 2008; O’Conner, et al., 2025). All of these things are associated with healthier and longer lives and in some cases are also associated with career and personal success (Vaillant, 2008).

Analysing student transition through a needs-based lens

There is, therefore, significant evidence in the literature, across a range of disciplines, that meeting underlying needs has a positive impact for health and wellbeing overall, while unmet needs can have negative consequences. While no single model of needs is universally accepted, there is strong evidence for many particular needs and consequently needs models display significant overlap. However, as there is no absolute agreement on any one model, selecting a model to use to analyse the relationship between needs and student transition requires a degree of pragmatism that includes consideration of the evidence base for each item on the list and good philosophical fit for the task at hand.

This article will use Human Givens Theory (HGT) (also known as Human Needs Theory), developed by Griffin and Tyrrell (2024), as the model for analysing student transition for a number of reasons. First, the theory is broadly in line with those discussed above but is one of the few that gives full consideration to both physical and emotional needs and is therefore consistent with more of the literature. Second, the list of needs contained within HGT is longer and absorbs most of those contained in the four psychological theories considered above and those that emerged as important through the longitudinal studies of health and aging. Third, the theory's list of needs is not exclusive and is intended to be understood and applied flexibly, meaning it avoids dogmatism.

Finally, the theory adds an additional move, adding that all living things also possess resources that allow them to meet these needs (Griffin & Tyrrell, 2024). Flowers have roots to draw up hydration and nourishment from the soil, leaves to turn sunlight into energy and pollen and seeds to reproduce. Human beings also have innate resources (evolved or given) which we can use to meet our physical needs, such as a digestive system to absorb nutrients from food, the ability to sleep, skin that can absorb vitamins from sunlight etc. In addition, the majority of people also have resources that can be used to help meet emotional needs (psychological and social) including memory, imagination, the capacity to acquire and use language, ability to build rapport with others, pattern matching, a rational mind and feelings, autonomic responses and emotions. However, these needs are flexible and must be developed over time to meet the specific environments in which each individual finds themselves e.g. most people have the capacity for language but the language they develop will depend on where and with whom they grow up. The ways in which rapport and relationships are established and maintained will vary between cultures. Through the use of these innate resources people then develop and acquire life resources, internally and within their environment, to enable them to practically meet their needs in their specific circumstances, for example skills, relationships, knowledge, physical things, finances etc.

This move is of particular relevance when considering the educational role of both university and the experience of transition into student life. Considering the resources students possess, how well adapted they are for the new environment and those they will need to develop anew, is not new in this field (Young & Bunting, 2024; Kift, 2015; Zepke, et al., 2005). However, they are usually only considered within the immediate narrow purpose of surviving and overcoming transition, not the larger consideration of how those resources must be attuned to meeting underlying needs for health and wellbeing. It also points towards potential answers as to why some students find the transition and ongoing experience more difficult despite similar academic abilities to those students who are more successful.

Each person develops resources required to meet their needs in their specific environment. Therefore, if, for an individual, their previous environment is very different from the university environment, then their resources may be less effective in helping them meet their needs in the new university environment. In

addition, their resources may be less valued or understood by those within that new environment. The implications of this are discussed further below.

Human Givens Theory and student transition

Human Givens Theory was first set forth by Griffin and Tyrrell in 1998 (Griffin & Tyrrell, 1998) and provides the underpinning theory for Human Givens Therapy (Adams & Allan, 2019; Burdett & Greenberg, 2019; Andrews, et al., 2013). The theory and the approach it informs have been applied in a range of settings including education, health care and business. The model considers a set of physical needs (sleep, diet, movement) and a list of 9 emotional needs (table 2).

Table 2 According to Human Givens Theory among our needs are the needs for:

Autonomy and Control
Safety and Security
Attention
Community
Emotional intimacy/quality connection
Status and value
Privacy and space
Competence and Achievement
Meaning and Purpose

To establish if the list of needs within this model are relevant to student transition and fit broadly with the evidence, a literature search was conducted using the wording of each need and appropriate synonyms alongside terms such as ‘student transition,’ ‘transition to university,’ ‘first year experience’ and ‘freshers.’ Articles were selected for their relevance and potential explanatory usefulness and the evidence identified is described under each need or set of needs below.

Physical needs

Research has established clear causal relationships between physical needs, such as sleep, diet and exercise/movement and physical and mental health and wellbeing. This is true for university students, particularly during transition. During the beginning of university many students decrease their physical activity, eat less healthily and less often and experience significant disruption to their sleep, with adverse consequences for their health, wellbeing and academic performance and persistence (Stores, et al., 2023; King, et al., 2023; Solomou, et al., 2024; Wilson, et al., 2021; Maillet & Grouzet, 2021; Soon, et al., 2025; Bukova, et al., 2025).

Control

Research has shown that students can experience a lowered sense of control and an increase in external locus of control during transition (Moilanen, 2021; Worsley, et al., 2017; Parker, et al., 2017; Fisher & Hood, 1987). This can occur due to increased and unclear academic demands, unfamiliar physical environments and structures, new responsibilities that feel beyond their current skills and social environments that are

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unknown and therefore more difficult to navigate (Cage, et al., 2021; Respondek, et al., 2017; Worsley, et al., 2017). Lowered control or an external locus of control and low levels of self-efficacy have been shown to have a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing in the general population and the student population (Khumalo & Plattner, 2019; Kurtovic, et al, 2018; Saleh, et al., 2017). They have also been shown to be related to reduced academic success and a greater likelihood of students dropping out (Suraj, et al., 2024; Respondek, 2017). There are also indications that students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds may be more likely to have lower self-efficacy and a greater external locus of control (Dougall, et al., 2023).

Sense of Safety and Security

New students can experience a reduced sense of safety in the classroom, the broader university environment and in student residential accommodation (Clausen, et al, 2024; Corney, et al, 2024; Sundqvist, 2024). A reduced sense of safety, including psychological safety can increase anxiety, reduce student engagement and participation, limit creativity and act as a barrier to belonging. Those students who feel a sense of difference to those around them, or sense an increased risk in raising their profile, may be less likely to feel psychologically safe (Meyer, et al 2003). Research suggests that this may be particularly true for Black students and those from other racialised minority or Global majority backgrounds (Wei, et al, 2011; Stoll, et al, 2023;), LGBTQ+ students (Mathies, et al, 2019; Kelleher, 2009), mature students (Kahu, 2014) and students who are first in their family to attend university (Groves & O'Shea, 2019).

Attention

Research shows that many new students feel a reduction in the level of attention they receive and many can feel anonymous in their new environment during the early weeks of the first year (Worsley, et al, 2021; Cage, et al, 2021). This may be particularly true for students who do not see themselves within the traditional university community, including those who are first generation, disabled or mature (Kamalumpundi, 2024; Kahu, 2014). Conversely when students do receive early attention from peers or lecturers/tutors, this can have significant positive impacts (Wong & Chapman, 2022; Mehan & Howells, 2018; Stokoe, et al, 2024). Even small changes, such as the perception that a lecturer knows a student's name can affect wellbeing, sense of belonging, commitment and persistence (Cooper, et al, 2017; Sandstrom, 2023).

Community

Since the 1970s at least, work in this area has identified the importance of social belonging for new students (Tinto, 1975). A sense of belonging to and playing a role in community has been shown to be important to wellbeing in the general population (Dunham, 2018). Within the university, students may find a number of communities to which they may belong including within their academic cohort, their academic discipline, their flatmates and/or in extracurricular societies or activities such as Students Unions (Meehan & Howells, 2018; Dost & Smith, 2023; Thompson, et al., 2021). Feeling part of and interacting with the community within the classroom has been shown to increase academic motivation and to support learning and wellbeing (Knickenberg & Zurbriggen, 2025; Upsher et al., 2022). Perceptions of social support during transition can impact student stress. Conversely, social isolation can result in declining mental health (Hamza, et al., 2021; McLean, et al., 2022).

Intimacy/quality of connection

Student loneliness has increased across the western world in recent years (Hysing, et al., 2020; UPP Foundation, 2024), with first year students being particularly vulnerable. Loneliness in students is associated with reduced cognitive functioning, academic underperformance, withdrawal and heightened distress, while strong social support is associated with improved life satisfaction, hope and motivation (Aslan, et al., 2025; Campbell, et al., 2022; Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). In both the general population and among students the quality (intimacy) of close relationships is a key factor in whether individuals experience loneliness or not – having close or meaningful friendships or relationships reduces the likelihood of loneliness, while those with fewer or no close relationships are more vulnerable (Wodika, et al, 2025; Norlin, et al., 2025; Hysing, et al., 2020; Barjakova, et al., 2023). Those students who may find it more difficult to encounter and develop close relationships with others like them can be more vulnerable to loneliness, e.g. international students, student carers and disabled students.

Sense of status and value

A sense of status within social groupings and feeling that you and your contributions matter is important for mental health and wellbeing both in the general population and among students (Prilleltensky, 2020; Schlossberg, 1989; Flett, et al., 2022; Smith & McLellan, 2024). Research has also shown that a feeling of not mattering can have negative effects on wellbeing and is linked to a greater likelihood of dropping out of university (Flett, et al., 2021). There is also an equality aspect to this, as demographic markers of perceived social status (lower levels of mattering) appear to be associated with poorer academic outcomes and higher levels of distress among students (Rahal, et al., 2023; Neves & Brown, 2022; Dougall, et al., 2023). For new students within a new environment and community, it can take time to build a sense of mattering and status, but some work suggests that activities designed to promote mattering and status can have positive effects on academic stress, wellbeing and commitment (Flett, et al., 2022).

Privacy

Having space to rest, reflect and consolidate and feeling some level of control over personal, physical space is important to psychological wellbeing and learning (Watts & Blenkinsop, 2021; Koops, et al., 2017, Siegel, 2008). New students, particularly those in student residential accommodation can experience a loss of privacy, particularly in communal spaces (Worsley et al., 2023; 2021; Foulkes, et al., 2021). Noise, sensory stimulation and social media can also disrupt private space. Disabled students often have to surrender some level of privacy in order to access reasonable adjustments to their learning (Eccles, et al, 2018).

Competence and achievement

Research has long identified the importance of a perceived sense of competence as being important for mental health (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Students' belief in their abilities to manage the transition to university and to be successfully both personally and academically can impact on their wellbeing, persistence and academic success (Ferla, et al., 2010; Cordova Olivera, et al., 2023; Collie, et al, 2024; Honicke & Broadbent, 2016). During transition students often report a gap between their perceived competence and the challenges they face (Cage, et al., 2021; Worsley, et al., 2021). Academic self-efficacy and self-attribution

seem to be particularly important elements that contribute to a sense of competence and ongoing learning and academic success (Grotan, et al., 2019; Boekaerts, et al., 2000; Drago, et al., 2016). Actions to increase students' sense of self-efficacy and overall competence can have a positive impact (Kordsalarzehl, 2025).

Meaning and Purpose

A sense of meaning and purpose has been shown to protect against poor mental health, increase physical health and lead to a significant likelihood of a longer life (Kim, et al., 2022; Sutin, et al., 2024; Steger, 2022). Meaning and purpose has also been found to be of importance to the wellbeing of the general student population and to students in transition in particular (Pfund, et al., 2020; Van de Meer, et al., 2023; Arslan, et al., 2020). This seems to relate to the meaning students derive from their experiences and the journey they perceive themselves to be taking and the meaning they gain from their academic study (Van der Meer, et al., 2023; Baik, et al., 2025; Postareff, et al., 2017; Upsher, et al., 2022). In particular, there is a connection between deep learning, through which students derive meaning, intrinsic motivation and positive emotional wellbeing and academic outcomes (Postareff, et al., 2017; Asikainen, et al., 2020).

Implications

The HGT model, then, appears to be largely consistent with the literature on transition. Given this it may be possible for this model to form the basis of a theoretical approach to understanding why the transition to university can be so challenging and why it may be more challenging for some students. The theory can be stated thus.

To be able to maintain health, flourish, grow and develop, all human beings must be able to meet their physical and emotional needs in the environment in which they find themselves. Therefore, new students must be able to meet their needs in the new university environment if they are to grow, develop, be healthy and flourish. When students are unable to do this, they are likely to experience distress, disconnection from the environment, lowered cognitive capacity, poorer overall experience leading to greater likelihood of academic underperformance and withdrawal.

All significant transitions have the potential to disrupt the ways in which an individual is able to meet their needs and so also have the potential to cause distress. The scale of the transition to university for many students represents a significant change to the ways in which they have previously been able to meet their needs; leaving behind old social networks, known environments and familiar resources and entering a new, unfamiliar environment that is possibly difficult to read and navigate. To be able to meet their needs new students may have to develop new skills and use their innate and life resources in new and unfamiliar ways.

An added element of HGT theory provides another nuance. It suggests that not only do we have resources that can enable us to meet our needs, we are actually required to use these resources to meet needs – our needs cannot be met passively. Growth and development comes from the use of our resources. For example, our muscular system is a resource that enables us to move and exercise. By exercising we strengthen this resource (our muscles), leading to better health and enabling us to exercise more in future. This creates a developing virtuous cycle.

This applies to other innate resources. Learning a second language makes it easier to learn a third. Learning in general (building memory) increases capacity for future learning. Being able to build rapport in different social circumstances makes it easier to quickly learn how to do so in a new social space.

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The role of each student's resources then is particularly important. If a student is familiar with environments broadly similar to the one they find in their university, then it may be easier to use already developed resources to meet their needs. For example, if their day-to-day language is culturally and socially a good fit to those around them, and if their ways of establishing rapport are similar to those employed by peers and staff, then it may be easier to establish new relationships, allowing them to meet their need for attention, community etc. If, however, their dialect, grammar, word usage etc. and ways of beginning rapport are very different from their peers and university staff (due to class background, for example), then building new relationships and feeling part of community may be more difficult. If a student has had the opportunity to develop their resources in a range of settings, then they may find it easier to adapt to a new setting. Cultural, social and navigational gaps that students cannot overcome can be disruptive and distressing because they act as environmental barriers to needs being met.

This may at least partly explain why pre-arrival interventions that seek to help students adapt to university life can be so effective. By taking time to help students develop their resources and acquire new skills adapted to the new environment, they are equipping them to be able to more quickly meet their needs. However, this also poses a challenge to universities – is it necessary that the environment is formed in such a way as to require students to adapt to such an extent, rather than allowing more or all students to be able to use more of the resources they have already developed. In other words, do we need students to change to fit their university or universities to change to fit their students? Should we be actively considering how we can change universities, so that we focus on the strengths and resources students bring, and on creating environments in which a more diverse range of resources can effectively help meet needs?

Learning

This article posed a number of questions for discussion -

1. Is the transition to university such a unique experience or is it an experience that shares common aspects with other episodes in life?

From the perspective of a needs theory (and particularly from a HGT perspective) we can argue that all transitions share a common core aspect, which explains why they can be disruptive and distressing. That is that transitions disrupt the ways an individual is able to use their resources to meet their needs in a healthy balance. Taking this perspective might provide a potential unifying theory that allows students and university colleagues to consider transition as a process through which new students have to meet their needs in a new environment.

2. If student transition and its challenges are considered in this wider context of other life transitions, might it allow more learning both for university staff and students?

There are a number of possible avenues for new learning that may come from considering transition on the basis of needs. First, placing students' needs and resources at the heart of university planning and intervention may help uncover the causal mechanisms behind why some approaches are effective and some less so. It may also lead to universities being able to reconsider their own environment to make it more genuinely accessible to the diversity of the whole student population. Finally, it may illuminate for students why transition can be challenging and provide focus for their own actions.

3. If there are broader lessons to be learned about the challenges transition poses in life generally, could the transition into university be used to explicitly equip students with learning that allows them to more successfully navigate subsequent transitions with fewer challenges and impacts on wellbeing?

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If transition is defined by its impact on the ability of an individual to meet their needs, then it may be possible to discuss this explicitly with students during transition, helping them to develop an understanding of why transition may be a challenge and, more importantly, to develop responses that allow for practical action to meet their needs more fully. This redefines the transition as an educational opportunity that may be a core part of the learning they gain at university – a learning opportunity within an explicit and understandable framework rather than a difficult to understand and amorphous experience. This has the potential to also equip them to be able to more successfully navigate future transitions.

Conclusion

The transition to university is one that is often challenging for many students and is often seen as unique. However, this transition bears underlying commonalities with other life transitions. Considering student transition through the lens of a needs theory (Human Givens Theory in this article), allows for the generation of new insights into this experience that may act as a guide to university and student action and student learning that may support them in future transitions.

Limitations

This is a proposal based on existing literature and has not been tested empirically. Additionally, HGT is only one of a number of needs theories and arguments could be made for considering others.

Biography

Dr. Gareth Hughes is a psychotherapist, researcher and lecturer. Gareth is the lead author for the University Mental Health Charter, leads the ongoing development of the programme and is a clinical advisor to Student Minds.

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