



## Transitions within transitions: Supporting students, and ourselves, through change in higher education

Casey Beaumont, Liverpool John Moores University, England

---

### ABSTRACT

This vignette reflects on over a decade of professional engagement with student transition into UK higher education, drawing on varied roles as a lecturer, Access and Foundation tutor, and Learning Development manager. Across these contexts, I have designed and delivered pre-arrival and first-year transition programmes and built teams and services aimed at easing students into and through university life - particularly those from 'at-risk' groups - by building engagement, confidence, belonging, and academic literacy. Yet while supporting student transitions has remained central to my practice, my roles, and the institutional and sectoral landscapes in which my work takes place have themselves undergone profound transitions.

Current conditions in UK higher education, including widespread financial deficits, course closures, and departmental restructures, demand reflection on how we design and sustain transition support. As I argued at the 2025 EFYE conference, the act of supporting transition must itself be understood as a transitional, iterative process. Programmes cannot be static or universal. They must remain sensitive to shifting contexts, student identities, and the evolving institutional cultures in which they are embedded.

This discussion explores how transition support can respond dynamically to both student needs and sectoral uncertainty. It highlights the value of collective, comparative, and compassionate approaches that reject deficit framings of students and instead foreground transition as a shared experience for students, staff, and institutions alike. Making transition and its psychological impact visible and developing a shared language that acknowledges the diverse but universal experience of change, may be the most powerful support we can offer in an uncertain higher education landscape.

**Keywords:** transition, student journey, higher education crisis, iterative design, communities of practice

### Transition and student support

Transitions can be defined as periods of change that significantly alter an individual's behaviour and outlook, often requiring psychological and emotional adjustment. They have been understood as consisting of stages of endings, in betweens, and beginnings, through which an individual moves, more or less successfully. Bridges and Bridges (2017) suggest that these stages occur regardless of whether transitional events are normative and part of the cultural lifecscript, for example entering university, or unexpected, like an economic disaster. Foundational work on human transition highlights the psychosocial impact of shifts in group memberships, navigation through social structures, loss or gain of privilege, changed identity, behaviour or sense of self (Van Gennep, 1960 Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Glaser & Strauss, 1971). Transition models emphasise the internal psychological process and importance of building personal resources and networks to support realignment (Schlossberg, 1981; Bridges, 1991; Bridges & Bridges, 2017), while

research identifies transitions as temporal landmarks that inform assessment and planning of life trajectories (Shi & Brown, 2021).

The student university experience has long been recognised as consisting of multiple, concurrent transitions and as leading to periods of disequilibrium that require support to successfully navigate. Many studies have highlighted how challenging students find their transition to university, with varied experiences of overcoming social, cultural, academic and financial barriers to integration and belonging, and a mismatch between the expected and actual university experience. This is seen to disproportionately affect particular groups, including mature, first in family, and international students, who arguably navigate more complex and uncertain pathways to and through university, and who may not fit traditional expectations of student engagement and performance (e.g. Christie, 2009; Thomas, 2012; Turner et al., 2017; Reay, 2018; Hayman et al., 2024).

Transition support within universities takes various forms, from programme inductions to specialised transition or development courses. These predominantly aim to demystify the university experience and create a sense of belonging and academic literacy that translates into student attainment and continuation. My own work on supporting student transition has included development of learning support services and teams as well as university-wide and programme-based pre-arrival and first-year transition programmes. These have aimed to ease students into university life, particularly those from widening participation, transnational, or 'at-risk' groups, by building engagement, belonging, confidence, and academic skills. They have taken place across multiple institutions and roles, including as a lecturer in Humanities and Education, as an access-to-HE and international foundation programme tutor, and as a Learning Development practitioner and manager. Yet, while supporting student transitions has remained central to my practice throughout my career, my roles, and the institutional and sectoral landscapes in which my work takes place, have themselves undergone profound transitions.

#### Higher education in transition

Most recently, the higher education (HE) sector is experiencing significant financial crisis, caused by an unsustainable funding model, increasing marketisation, and shifts in international recruitment. This has led to widespread reorganisation, restructures and redundancies, displacement of thousands of university staff, and an overall reduction in university resources (Office for Students, 2024; Times Higher Education, 2025). The impact of this is being felt across institutions, with pressure on remaining staff to deliver an excellent student experience with fewer resources, loss of colleagues, sometimes whole departments, in a context of low morale and trepidation for the future.

In my own experience of these changes, I have moved into a newly-developed role that specialises in Transitions and Development, with a focus on designing interventions that support the student journey. While this is ultimately a positive move for me, it has, like any transition, required navigation of change, adaptation of practice, expansion and redirection of energy and aims. It has been marked by dynamic transformation of workplace culture and personal and professional growth, but also disconnection, loss, grief and shifts in perception and identity, as I leave behind previous practices, people and ways of being. I can understand this experience in relation to various transition models, including those of Schlossberg (1981), Bridges (1991), Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) - it was a conversation with a colleague who was also disrupted by institutional restructures, and struggling to reach acceptance of their changed

circumstances and role, that both raised this in my mind and provided me with comparative support during my own experience of 'disenfranchised grief' (Doka, 1989).

Indeed, as these transition models remind us, grief can be present not only when something good ends, but when anything significant changes in a way that materially or mentally affects us. This includes loss of routines, systems, cultures, cherished coworkers and their expertise, and occurs even when the change is necessary, chosen, or developmental. It is this, and the disruption to our identity narrative, that makes transitions stressful and demotivating and adds to the psychological strain of change, especially if one's identity does not transfer easily from one context to another. Or indeed if one's context is also undergoing disruption and transition.

In a time of not only financial and technological, but also ideological, threat to the status quo of HE, and a context of widespread financial deficits, course closures, departmental restructures (Post, 2025; Harrison & Harvie, 2025) and adaptation of delivery models, it is essential that we reflect on how we design and sustain the transition experiences of our students. As I argued at the European First Year Experience conference (Beaumont & Rothwell, 2025), the act of supporting transition must itself be an ongoing iterative process that responds to shifting local and sector or societal practices, demands and resources. Transition programmes cannot be static or universal, but should remain sensitive to shifting contexts, student identities, and the evolving institutional cultures in which they are embedded. These cultures are built and experienced by both staff and students, in response to personal changes and wider institutional and educational shifts in an increasingly Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) environment (see, in relation, Sarid & Levanon, 2023). Understanding the impact these evolving cultures have on individuals moving through them is fundamental to identifying and developing the support required for effective transition.

#### Building a collective approach to transition support

Scholarly work on transition has increasingly called for a more nuanced understanding than some earlier models or theories provide. Postmodernist feminist scholars, for instance, have challenged depictions of transition as movement from one life stage or crisis to another, with periods of stability in between. They argue that this view of transition overlooks the female perspective of being psychologically in transit throughout their lives (Hughes, 2002). This obscures our understanding of the ongoing emotional conflict and management required to negotiate life's changes, which may reproduce inequalities of gender and class (Skeggs, 1997; Colley, 2007). Supporting transition thus requires a deeper understanding of how people react socially, emotionally and cognitively as they progress through different stages of the educational lifecycle, and how they navigate these shifts in relation to their personal experience (Eccleston, Biesta & Hughes, 2009). Understanding the emotions of transition is also important if we are to design measures that support students' wellbeing as well as their academic attainment (Young et al., 2020).

Broadening our view of transition to one of perpetual movement, defined by diverse and subjective experiences of ongoing and non-linear fluctuations has led to the reconceptualisation of transitions as a process of 'becoming' (Gale & Parker, 2014). Similarly, Young and Bunting (2024) see the student experience as a "protracted series of transitions" which are themselves learning opportunities and pathways to deep experiential learning. These perspectives are useful in terms of identifying limiting practices or systems that fail to support or adapt to the multiplicities of experiences (Gravett, 2020), and in reframing our support of the student journey. This may be best achieved through development of a shared language and articulation

of the psychological effects of transition; in conversations that reveal our vulnerability in times of disruption, that include students as authentic members of the transitional university community, and that model the networks, help-seeking behaviours, and personal development required to navigate change.

The building of collaborative networks provides access to expertise and models of practice that exist beyond our local or individual contexts, structures or perspectives. This idea is reflected in both nature and philosophical concepts of *being* and *becoming*, in which crises and transitions are supported through a rhizomatic or horizontal connection with others (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Taylor & Harris-Evans, 2018; Liljenberg, 2022). It is reflected in my own, self as participant, experience of transition, in which conversations with colleagues experiencing similar disruptions are fundamental to supporting my adaptation to the changes to my work, institution and wider sector. Universities are communities of ‘coming to know’, formed of multiple social identities and ongoing culture shifts (Fergie, 2014). They, and those of us who work within them, have relevant experience of change, adaptation, and development of resilience plans (Alvarez-Robinson, 2024). As communities of practice, we are well placed to validate and support students as they transition through one of the most disruptive phases of their lifecourse, and to foster a collective approach to navigating uncertainty and crisis.

Ultimately, my work with students and my own transitional experiences highlight the value of comparative and compassionate approaches that reject standardised framings of transition or isolate individuals’ experience of change from concurrent shifts in environment and culture. Rather, these foreground transition as a shared and valuable, though still challenging, experience that is made easier when the impact of related emotional and cognitive shifts is acknowledged and legitimised by the communities in which they take place.

## Biography

*Casey Beaumont* is Lecturer in Transition and Development at Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moores University. A Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, and with a background spanning work in Humanities, Education, Social Sciences and professional services, she specialises in supporting student transition and academic and digital literacy development. Her current work focuses on creating inclusive, cross-disciplinary practices and interventions that foster confidence, connection, and resilience among learners, contributing to institutional strategies that embed student success and personal growth from the very start of the university journey.

You can contact Casey at [C.J.Beaumont@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:C.J.Beaumont@ljmu.ac.uk) or connect with her on LinkedIn: [www.linkedin.com/in/dr-casey-beaumont-1435296a](https://www.linkedin.com/in/dr-casey-beaumont-1435296a)

## References

Alvarez-Robinson. (2024, February 27). *How to face adversity and change in higher education with resilience*. THE Campus Learn, Share Connect.

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/how-face-adversity-and-change-higher-education-resilience>

Beaumont, C.J., & Rothwell, P.R. (2025, May 27). *Developing a framework for implementation of a digital first-year induction and transition course*. European First Year Experience Conference, Leuven, Belgium.

Bridges, W.. (1991). *Managing transitions: Making the most of change*. Perseus Books.

- Bridges, W., & Bridges, S. (2017). *Managing transitions: Making the most of change* (4th ed.). Da Capo Lifelong Books.
- Christie, H. (2009). Emotional journeys: young people and transitions to university. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30(2), 123–136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690802700123>
- Colley, H. (2007). Understanding time in learning transitions through the lifecourse. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 17(4), 427–443. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620210701667103>
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. L. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (B. Massumi, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.
- Doka, K. J. (Ed.). (1989). *Disenfranchised grief: Recognizing hidden sorrow*. Lexington Books.
- Ecclestone, K., Biesta, G., & Hughes, M. (2009). *Transitions and learning through the lifecourse*. Routledge.
- Fergie, D. (2014). University transitions in practice: research-learning, fields and their communities of practice. In D. Fergie, H. Brook, M. Maeorg, & D. Michell (Eds.), *Universities in Transition: Foregrounding Social Contexts of Knowledge in the First Year Experience* (pp. 41–74). University of Adelaide Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.20851/j.ctt1t304xh.6>
- Gale, T., & Parker, S. (2014). Navigating change: a typology of student transition in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(5), 734–753. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2012.721351>
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1971). *Status passage: A formal theory*. Aldine Publishing Company
- Gravett, K. (2020). *Re-imagining students' becomings: new approaches to thinking and doing transition*. [Doctoral thesis, The University of Surrey]. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15126/thesis.00856603>
- Harrison, R., & Harvie, D. (2025). Universities Degraded: Staff Experiences & Employer Practices of Redundancies in UK Higher Education. *Zenodo*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15638922>
- Hayman, R., Wharton, K., Bell, L., & Bird, L. (2024). Navigating the first year at an English university: exploring the experiences of mature students through the lens of transition theory. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 43(1), 39–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2023.229767>
- Holmes, T. H., & Rahe, R. H. (1967). The Social Readjustment Rating Scale. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 11(2), 213–218. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-3999\(67\)90010-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-3999(67)90010-4).
- Hughes, C. (2002). *Feminist Theory and Research*. Sage
- Kübler-Ross E., & Kessler D. (2005). *On grief and grieving: Finding the meaning of grief through the five stages of loss*. Scribner
- Liljenberg, A. (2022, August 16). *Towards a Rhizomatic Future - Farsight*. Farsight. <https://farsight.cifs.dk/towards-a-rhizomatic-future/>
- Office for Students. (2024). Financial sustainability of higher education providers in England: 2024 - Office for Students. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/financialsustainability-of-higher-education-providers-in-england-2024/>
- Post, H. G. (2025, July 8). *The state of the UK higher education sector's finances - HEPI*. HEPI. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/07/08/the-state-of-the-uk-higher-education-sectors-finances/>
- Reay, D. (2018). Working class educational transitions to university: The limits of success. *European Journal of Education, Research, Development and Policy*, 53(4), 528–540. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12298>
- Schlossberg, N. K. (1981). A model for analyzing human adaptation to transition. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 9(2), 2–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001100008100900202>
- Sarid, A., & Levanon, M. (2023). Embracing dualities: Principles of education for a VUCA world. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 55(12), 1375–1386. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2022.2162384>
- Shi L. & Brown, N. (2021) Beliefs About Transitional Events: The Effect of Experience and Life-Script Consistency *Frontiers in Psychology*, Volume 12 – 2021. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.727524>
- Skeggs, B. (1997). (Dis)identifications of class: On not being working class. In *Formations of class and gender: Becoming respectable* (pp. 74–96). SAGE Publications. Skeggs, B.
- Taylor, C. A., & Harris-Evans, J. (2018). Reconceptualising transition to Higher Education with Deleuze and Guattari. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(7), 1254–1267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1242567>

- Times Higher Education. (2025, April 4). *UK university redundancies: latest updates*. Times Higher Education (THE). <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/uk-university-redundancies-latest-updates>
- Thomas, L. (2012). What works? Facilitating an effective transition into higher education. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 14 (Special), 4-24. <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.14.S>.
- Turner, R., Morrison, D., Cotton, D., Child, S., Stevens, S., Nash, P., & Kneale, P. (2017). Easing the transition of first year undergraduates through an immersive induction module. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 22(7), 805–821. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2017.1301906>
- Van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites of passage* (M. B. Vizedom & G. L. Caffee, Trans.). Routledge and Kegan Paul. (Original work published 1909)
- Young, D.G. & Bunting, B.D. (2024). *Rethinking Student Transitions : How Community, Participation, and Becoming Can Help Higher Education Deliver on Its Promise*, National Resource Center for The First Year Experience & Students in Transition. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ljmu/detail.action?docID=31522073>.
- Young, E., Thompson, R., Sharp, J., & Bosmans, D. (2020). Emotional transitions? Exploring the student experience of entering higher education in a widening-participation HE-in-FE setting. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44(10), 1349–1363. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2019.1688264>