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Collaborative practice in enhancing the first year student experience in Higher Education

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Abstract

Transition into higher education presents challenges for students, whatever their age or previous educational history. An emerging issue on an undergraduate programme in England was how to support students who self reported educational histories of continual formative feedback, model answers, revision guides and limited use of the library. This article reports findings from an action research project which considered whether there was a mismatch between students' previous educational histories and the academic expectations of the university. Findings indicated that academic expectations did not fully take account of previous student experiences. Student responses also indicated little previous guidance around effective internet searching and libraries were rarely used prior to starting university. Transitional scaffolding was positively evaluated, students reporting greater confidence levels in accessing appropriate resources, high levels of student completion, retention and satisfaction.

Key Words: Transitions, Assessment support, National Curriculum, Educational histories, Expectations, Higher Education, Student voice, Widening participation, Scaffolding.

Introduction

The 1988 Education Act saw the introduction of the National Curriculum in England and with it a focus on core subjects, foundation subjects and testing. Since this time the delivery of the curriculum and testing procedures have been repeatedly reviewed and changes made (Chitty, 2004; Ball, 2008). Alongside these changes has been growth in the higher education sector and a focus on lifelong learning, widening participation, employability and graduate skills (Gibson and Luxton, 2009). Indeed, one of the goals of the former Labour Government (1997-2010) was for fifty percent of people aged 18-30 to go to university (Crabtree *et al.*, 2007). Wingate (2007) argues that this expansion has resulted in contemporary students having a range of educational histories that reflect different experiences, qualifications and academic ability; views echoed by Hussey and Smith (2010). Additionally, many of the students currently accessing higher education places are the first cohorts to have fully experienced the National Curriculum, since the age of five.

Over the last few years there have been emerging concerns on an undergraduate degree in Early Childhood Studies about how to provide appropriate support to new students as they started their journey in higher education. Anecdotally, concerns were expressed about students being unable to access library resources, not being able to select appropriate internet resources, requesting drafts of their work marked and lacking basic writing skills such as structuring an essay, using paragraphs appropriately or being able to write a letter. Dialogues with the students led to self reporting that their previous experience of education had included continual formative feedback

prior to final submission of their work, provision of revision guides and limited use of the library.

In order to provide more effective student support a range of strategies were introduced to scaffold new students into university life. These included a proactive 'Welcome Week', a peer mentoring scheme (Lumsden, 2009) and collaborative partnerships with the Department of Information Services (converged Library and IT provision), to support the development of information literacy and, with the Centre for Academic Practice, to promote study skills. However, there still appeared to be barriers to students accessing this support of their own volition. In the university's internal student survey (2008-2009) they also expressed slightly less satisfaction (71%) with library facilities compared to the rest of the university (74%). Consequently, it was decided to formally consult with the students to hear their voice about their previous educational experiences and views about the support they thought was needed. The findings from this dialogue constitute the focus of this article. To contextualise this, there will be an examination of research into new students' experiences of entering higher education. This will be followed by specific consideration of the educational histories and transitional experiences of a single cohort of students who commenced higher education in September 2009. Finally, discussion will focus on a new model of student support, 'Transitional Bridging' aimed at scaffolding the student in becoming an independent learner. This model is potentially transferable and could support the transitional process into higher education for all students.

Literature

Readiness, Retention and Transition

The transition of students to university is receiving increasing international attention. The interest is multi-dimensional with concerns stemming from a student's readiness for university study and issues of retention, the latter being an important performance indicator for English universities (HEFCE, 2007). As Wingate (2007:392) suggests, transition into higher education is important; it impacts on retention with the majority of students who leave within the first year of study citing a 'lack of preparation for and understanding of the type of learning that is required.' The concern about student retention is also echoed by Crabtree *et al.* (2007); and in the literature review conducted by Trotter and Roberts (2006) findings indicated a consistent theme, namely that the way in which first year students made their transition into higher education was vital in supporting their engagement with university life. Furthermore, the more a student is 'embedded', both from an academic and social aspect, the more likely they are to succeed (Crabtree *et al.*, 2007; Wingate, 2007; Reason *et al.*, 2006; Mayhew *et al.*, 2010). Similar issues were also raised by Brinkworth *et al.* (2009) in research which considered the gap between students expectations of university in Australia, their experience in the first year and tutor perceptions.

This 'reconceptualisation' of the student entering higher education is reinforced by a number of researchers (Reason *et al.*, 2006; Trotter and Roberts, 2006; Wingate, 2007; Christie *et al.*, 2008; Hulberg *et al.*, 2008; Leese, 2010). Whilst educational histories may be different within universities the 'traditional expectations towards students has not changed: they are to manage their learning and acquire academic literacy independently' (Wingate, 2007:392). However, if those joining university through what is termed the 'widening participation agenda,' focusing on

non traditional students and the 'National Curriculum agenda' embracing all students from mainstream education, are to actually achieve their desired qualifications, there needs to be a shift in how universities operate. This shift in practice is supported by the work of Booth (2009) whose research on history students at a Russell Group university clearly identifies the mismatch between university expectations and the reality of previous education experiences where performativity and target meeting have been the norm, in private as well as state schools. Consequently, refocusing resources on the transition process could lead to monetary savings. Furthermore as Hussey and Smith (2010) argue, if individual transitions received greater attention, then education outcomes would be positively impacted upon and retention would be less of an issue. Trotter and Roberts (2006:372) also contribute to the debate by advocating 'the notion of the 'front loading' of institutional action as an appropriate strategy to reduce early incidence of student departure.' Their research, comparing two courses at an English university, one with high retention, and another with low retention, identified programme and university level support as important. At a programme level the initial marketing strategy, induction processes, personal tutor support and an 'ethos of attendance' played a vital role in retention, as did early assessment with formative feedback, lecture/seminar sessions in which students actively participated and a timetable that allowed students to undertake a level of part-time working. At a university level there needs to be a strategic approach to supporting, enabling and monitoring this process.

Student retention appears to be affected by a number of factors including how well they are prepared at school, whether there is a difference between the students' expectations and the reality of their chosen university, their initial engagement with the university through the induction process, personal tutorial support, attendance, learning and teaching strategies and formative feedback (Harvey *et al.*, 2006; Trotter and Roberts, 2006; Crabtree *et al.*, 2007; Leese, 2010). Thus student retention is multi-dimensional and multi-layered, with issues that are personal, course specific or the concern of the wider university. This suggests that the transition to higher education requires a holistic university strategy rather than individual 'ad hoc initiatives'. Furthermore, the strategy has to recognise that sometimes individual circumstances are beyond the reach of any retention strategy (Harvey *et al.*, 2006; Wingate, 2007). Hussey and Smith (2010) also consider the importance of transitions in relation to the autonomous student and suggest that this can be recognised when the student is self-directed and has become a learner who knows how to access support when needed. However, they cannot reach this situation until they have been supported in what Wingate (2007:391) refers to as 'Learning to Learn.' Here they need to be supported in becoming independent learners, who 'critically engage' with their subject area rather than be passive learners. They need to become what Christie *et al.* (2008:568) describe as 'co-producers of meaning.' Additionally, Hussey and Smith (2010:157) contend:

For a student to possess autonomy they must have the knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities necessary to pursue their studies; together with the power, self-confidence and motivation to exercise these attributes. It will also involve a degree of meta-cognition: an understanding of the methods of studying and learning that they employ.

However, in order to support the student to reach this position, course tutors need to be attuned to the academic and social needs of the student cohort both as individuals and a group.

Additionally, wider university systems need to be in place that are accessible to the student and recognise the importance of scaffolding students into autonomous learning (Bordonaro and Richardson, 2004; Hutberg *et al.*, 2008).

Academic and Library Skills

One of the challenges of the expanding nature of university admissions is the diversity of academic skills that the students have acquired before starting their course. Booth (2009) considers the issues around enabling students to meet the demands of academic study. He acknowledges that there have been developments in some areas, such as their ability to use IT more effectively than previous generations, but contends that there are additional obstacles that have to be addressed. His literature review found issues that are relevant to all courses. He argues that the situation has been impacted upon by the challenges facing those teaching A Levels, including the need to meet performance targets and support the student with what they need to know for the exam. This has resulted in some students having difficulty constructing arguments, an over reliance on information provided by tutors rather than reading around their subject; students lacking the skills of analytical reading, having poor spelling and grammar, lacking library research skills and being more focused on structured learning to pass exams.

The lack of confidence in using the library and the need for support with IT skills has been the focus of specific research. Walters (2003) found confidence levels in using the library impacted on how often students accessed it, which subsequently affected the quality of the work they produced. Research undertaken by Bent (2008) further highlighted a lack of confidence and gaps in students' practical experience in using libraries that, she suggests, can be bridged by greater liaison between university library staff and schools, and universities being more committed to providing literature to support students. This could also be developed through specific projects such as Aim Higher, which aims to provide school students with the chance to experience higher education (Aim Higher, 2010).

Brinkworth *et al.* (2009) add to the debate arguing that the way in which the first year at university is constructed, including the way in which students are supported before they start at university can have a major impact, not only on student retention but also on their academic success. However, whilst information literacy has been the focus of research, Maybee (2006) argues there has been a lack of engagement with students directly. This situation has been addressed by Gibson and Luxton (2009) whose longitudinal research to be conducted between 2009 and 2012 will focus on the student experience.

In summary, the literature concerning the first year experience highlights some significant learning points for higher education as a whole. These include the importance of addressing transitional scaffolding issues for all students, not just those that fall within the widening participation agenda. Furthermore, it appears important to acknowledge previous educational experiences to scaffold the gap for those at school or college in relation to their expectations of higher education. By proactively engaging and debating these areas there are positive indicators that the whole student experience and consequently retention and attainment can be favourably impacted upon.

Methodology and Methods

This action research was concerned with the transitional challenges experienced by the first year undergraduate students with diverse educational histories, studying Early Childhood Studies at an English post 1992 university during 2009-2010. Mixed methods were employed (questionnaires and a focus group) which aimed to evaluate, act upon and develop transferable knowledge (Gilbert, 2008; Mukherji and Albon, 2010). The main research question asked if there was a mismatch between students' previous educational histories and the academic and support staff expectations as they entered university.

The researchers were mindful of the ethical issues of research on a student cohort, who arguably may believe they have to participate because of the perceived power imbalance between themselves and the researchers who are their academic tutors (Robson, 2002; Creswell, 2007; Gilbert, 2008). In order to address this issue the researchers actively engaged students in dialogues about research ethics, linking it to the ethics that the students themselves had to employ in the case study elements of their first year study. The research aims were clearly outlined and students were invited to participate by completing anonymous questionnaires. They only had to provide contact details if they were willing to participate in a focus group interview.

The research focused primarily on support provided in two modules. Module 1 had a semester presentation, with two assignments, a group presentation and an essay. Module 2 focused on their personal, academic and professional development and was delivered throughout the academic year. Specific support is provided in this module with academic writing styles and presentation skills. Questionnaires and a focus group enabled the researchers to develop a picture of previous experiences and act upon this by developing open dialogues with the students to discuss the issues, thus enabling a re-evaluation of the support offered. This reframed support was evaluated at the end of the first semester and the findings were acted upon to embed further support in the programme during the remainder of the first year and develop new models of working. In addition the whole student experience of the first year cohort was analysed in relation to student attainment, satisfaction and retention.

Findings and Discussion

Student Characteristics and Educational Histories.

The changing characteristics of students entering higher education is well documented (Trotter and Roberts, 2006; Wingate, 2007; Crabtree et al., 2007; Hussey and Smith, 2010; Leese, 2010). 76 students with diverse educational histories commenced the course, 71 participated in the first questionnaire, 67 completed the second and 6 took part in the focus group. One of the characteristics is that 96% of the students were female, which is not unusual for courses focusing on early childhood (Leese, 2010). There were no international students; 86% were White British, 8% Black/Black British and 5% Asian/Asian British and one student described herself as mixed. 73% had studied A levels, 14% BTEC and 4% an access course and 9% had other qualifications such as NVQ 3.

One of the challenges experienced by new students is that they had previous educational experiences of performativity and target setting (Booth, 2009). The Conservative Government (1979-1997) introduced the National Curriculum and according to Chitty (2004) the Labour

Government (1997-2010) began their term in office by trying to dismantle it. They placed education, including the early years, on the top of their political agenda with legislative change, investment, increased regulation, inspection and with it a growing critical debate (Chitty, 2004; Ball, 2008). Therefore it is only in the last few years that those entering university at 18 have experienced the National Curriculum since they started school. In relation to the sample for this research 76% were aged 18-20 years old and 14% were aged 21-26, therefore they are higher education students whose diverse educational histories included testing, target setting and performativity. Indeed, their primary and secondary education experiences have taken place in a climate where education has become even more politicised.

Academic and Library Skills

Despite the political focus on education, research suggests that students start university without the skills that will enable them to immediately embrace independent academic study (Trotter and Roberts, 2006; Crabtree *et al.*, 2007; Windgate, 2007). If use of the library is considered, this research has reinforced that it is important not to make assumptions about previous experiences (Walters, 2003; Bent, 2009). 48% of the research sample indicated that they never used a library and a further 21% indicated that they accessed a library about once a month. 69% reported they had received no library research support, or it had been poor. The first assignment for this course is aimed at supporting students developing these skills by using the library in groups. However, it is not surprising that students expressed how hard they found completion of the assignment as they had little experience of the library environment, little understanding of the nature of an 'academic library' nor did they have the necessary skills to access the library resources.

The challenges of this assignment were compounded further by a misconception that the students joining the course from school or college had well-developed skills in using the Internet. 63% respondents indicated that they had received no, or poor, support with skills in searching the Internet. This supported research undertaken with a similar cohort of students studying Early Childhood Studies at a post 1992 university (Leese, 2010). Again the focus group provided some richer understanding of the student early experiences. As one stated "*The intranet side of it I found an absolute minefield, you need so many passwords, so many different things to access.*" The need to provide early support, and misconceptions of students' skills at the start of university highlighted in the literature (Reason *et al.*, 2006; Crabtree *et al.*, 2007; Windgate, 2007; Hussey and Smith, 2010; Mayhew *et al.*, 2010) has been supported further by the students' responses to their previous experiences of assessment work. These responses reflected the experiences of all students, including those that had completed an Access course. 84% of students indicated that their work was always, or often, marked as a draft and 88% that they were always, or often, given advice to improve their work. Furthermore, 57% stated they were always, or often, given model answers, and 33% sometimes received these. 59% had received personal tutorials to support them with assignments and 69% of the students had some experience of changeable hand-in dates. Revision guides were part of the previous educational experience, with 45% always, or often, being provided with these; 30% sometimes being given them and 33% always, or often, buying revision guides. Consequently, it was not surprising that students found the initial assessment demands of the course challenging as, apart from limited in-module assignment support, none of the students' previous experiences were being mirrored. Moreover

the findings highlighted the gap between expectations of the course team and the skills students actually had.

Based on these findings the course team and the Department of Information Services reviewed the transitional support being offered and made immediate changes that offered support to the student through a series of scaffolding approaches. There was increased focus in lectures and seminars on providing support with the assignment tasks. Concurrently the Academic Librarian attended lectures, provided hands-on workshops and individual support for students to develop their information literacy skills and confidence in using the library. Additionally, a series of assignment support documents were created to cover the assignments. These offered tailored guidance in relation to finding and evaluating relevant information for the specific assignment. As the students progressed to the next assignment the support advice was tapered to mesh with their developing skills and their move towards independent information seeking behaviour. Students were offered the opportunity to book one-to-one support with the Academic Team to underpin the advice if they felt it would be beneficial. Students also had sessions from the Centre for Academic Practice on academic writing skills and an individual tutorial. Alongside this they had support from peer mentors.

The second questionnaire provided the opportunity for students to comment on this scaffolding support. They were extremely positive about the in-session support they had received. 98% of the students found the lecture support very useful or useful, 66% of respondents found the seminar support very useful or useful. In relation to the peer mentors 55% found this a very useful or useful support provider. 66% rated the drop-in sessions in the library useful and 67% found the assignment support document very useful.

The focus group provided greater insights into how the support provided by the Department of Information Services could be developed further for future students. Their suggestions included increasing the amount of support from the library and ensuring it was provided in a timely manner. A further area raised by the focus group in relation to the library was the need for information about the nature of an academic library. They evidenced some misunderstanding about the library resources, some respondents felt that the 'old books' should be removed from the library. They did not appreciate that these were valuable resources to the researcher, which they themselves would be in 2 years time.

During the focus group respondents were positive about the scaffolding approach taken, including the use of the first assignment to develop the use of Turnitin, a plagiarism detection programme, to support writing in their own words, in-session and library support, the use of peer mentors and the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). However they raised some very valuable areas for reflection. The student concerns focused on three areas, the first of these was support including its timing, quality and type. The second area involved library resources and concerns were expressed about the age, number and availability of books. They also shared how daunting it was actually reading the books both the course texts and those on the reading list. Responses included *"I ordered them, went through them but to be honest it might have well been [in a different language],"* *"they were heavy weren't they... not in weight."* The third issues related to the library itself, a number of students reported on the large size of this facility and on their difficulty in knowing where to access resources.

The focus group provided useful insights into difficulties students encountered that might not previously have been fully appreciated by the course team and research partners. Practical problems were highlighted such as: multiple passwords for different systems; the physical distance between print release stations and printers and insufficient power sockets. Student comments included: *“it would be better if the printing computers were near the printers instead of making someone stand by the printer to make sure that it is definitely going to send”* and *“you have a big table..., and then there are two power points and three of you with laptops.”* Off-site students reported experiences of variable access to resources, as well as on-site students encountering problems of access at times of peak demand. Students commented that *“The library computers [should be] for research and not sitting on Facebook and playing poker and all the rest of it. How frustrating is it when you have the books there and you need to look at something and there is someone sitting on Facebook.”* However, in these times of ubiquitous ownership of digital devices, and the wide use of Web 2.0 applications in higher education learning and teaching, it should not automatically be assumed that students are using Facebook or other web applications for recreational purposes. Interestingly the Department of Information Services has its own Facebook page. Practical steps are being taken by Information Services to address these student concerns in its commitment to provide a quality learning experience.

Impact

Research has indicated that most students who leave university before the end of their course do so within the first year (Crabtree, *et al.*, 2007; HEFCE, 2007; Wingate, 2007). This particular course has had an upward trend in relation to retention over the past five years as the course team have proactively addressed issues of recruitment and retention. During this period the course has increased from 50 to 75 students and the withdrawal rates have decreased from 16% (n 9) in 2005-06 to 4% (n 3) for this research cohort (2009-10). In fact, only two students left, both for personal reasons, and the third never engaged after enrolment. Arguably the developed transitional scaffolding strategies for 2009-10 have positively impacted in supporting this situation. Findings from the research supported the admissions process which now makes explicit to potential students the expectations of study at degree level, and the support available to them as they develop graduate skills. For example, flyers about the library and the Academic Librarians are being included in mailing to the students joining the course in 2010.

It is in the area of attainment and student satisfaction that the impact of the transitional scaffolding support is evident. There are four modules in year one and student pass levels ranged between 96%-99% (n74-75) at the first sit. One of the implications of this is that there will only be five resit assignments to be marked for the summer exam board. As two of these are because of mitigating circumstance applications, the overall achievements of this cohort are impressive and fully support the argument presented by Hussey and Smith (2010) that outcomes and retention are positively impacted upon by proactive strategies and can result in actual financial savings.

Students have also indicated high levels of satisfaction with all their modules studied during the first year, with satisfaction rates in all areas of teaching and learning being 90% and above. If the specific modules researched are considered, student satisfaction levels were impressive, with teaching and learning aspects ranging between 96-100% good-very good for both modules, and assignment support and return ranging between 93-100% good-very good. Students were asked to specifically feed back at the end of Module 1 on how they believed their academic skills had

developed. All students on the module reported that their skills at researching, academic writing and group work had developed; such responses concur with Wingate's findings (2007) in relation to the importance of supporting students 'Learning to Learn.' Students' comments included: *"This module has forced me to improve and develop my reading and analysis skills," "the annotated bibliography and other written assignments have helped greatly with my writing and reference skills"* and *...this module has helped me to develop my skills at analysing information as you're not just given all of the information, you have to read around the subject yourself and analyse different information and concepts and develop your own opinions...it has helped me to write in an academic way...learn to consolidate my knowledge...to fit within the word count..Feedback has helped me to develop my writing skills.*

A further area where the student experience may have been improved is that of satisfaction with library resources and services. The below average satisfaction levels voiced by students through the Internal Student Survey for 2008-2009 had been one of the motivators for engaging directly with students about their experiences of using Information Services. The internal student survey (2009-2010) indicated a 13% rise with 82% of students expressing high satisfaction levels with the services provided (The University of Northampton, 2010).

For the second year, peer mentoring was available for students joining the course. Five students from Year 2 provided both social and course related support prior to students joining the university, during welcome week and beyond. During Module 1 and 2 peer mentors were included in sessions focusing on assignment preparation and during the rest of the year they provided drop in sessions around assignment time both face to face and by email. Some first year students were more active in accessing this support than others. At the end of Module 1, students were specifically asked about the role of the peer mentor and 55% indicated that they had found it useful or very useful, supporting the premise that the role of the mentor can be key in this process, especially in the transition period to Higher Education, when new ways of learning have to be embraced and different relationships with the educators developed (Colvin, 2007; Storrs *et al.*, 2008).

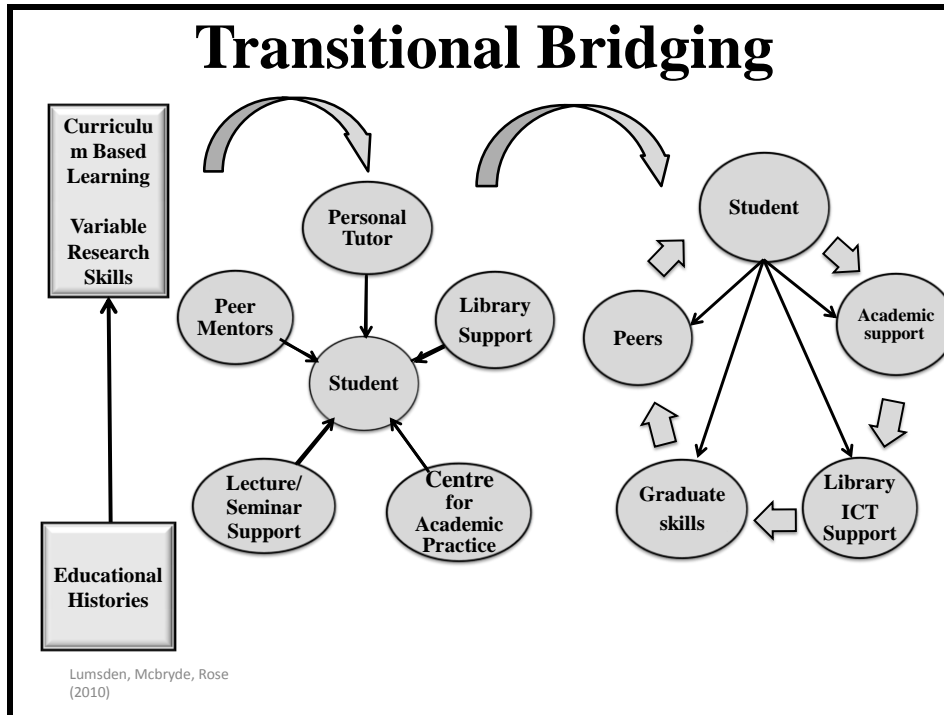
Conclusion

The transition to university has always presented challenges to new students, whatever their age or previous education history. The difference now is that we need to recognise the impact of education policy over the last twenty years on new students' previous educational histories. It is important that students are not viewed in a deficit framework; they should, on the contrary, be empowered, through a process of transitional scaffolding, to become autonomous learners who can embrace the learning experience and other aspects of university life.

As part of the reconceptualisation of the student experience in Year 1, this action research project enabled the course team and the Department of Information Services to make visible the mismatch between previous educational experiences and the expectations of those working with the students. By making differences explicit, it was possible to make immediate changes to the support systems for this cohort of students - changes that appeared to impact positively on all aspects of the students' university experience. The learning that took place resulted in the development of a new model for scaffolding students into the course, which is being adopted by other courses in the School of Education. The model also provides students, academics and

others with the opportunity to understand the support processes needed to bridge students into higher education, and enable them to become autonomous learners (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Transitional Bridging



This diagram supports understanding of the student experience prior to coming to university, and the ‘team’ needed around the student to scaffold their transition towards autonomous learning. It has the potential to support dialogues with students at the start of their engagement with academic study and at different points in time to reflect on their journey towards a learner who is able to access the appropriate support when necessary.

If students are to become independent learners who have a deep knowledge of their subject, they need to be actively supported with the transition process. This research concurs with the work of others in relation to the importance and long term benefits of transitional support that reflects proactive collaboration between university departments. It also adds to an emerging area impacting on the educational histories of students starting university, namely the National Curriculum. This issue does not appear to have yet fully engaged the research community since research has hitherto focused on the widening participation and lifelong learning agenda. However it is now becoming evident that the transitional process of students from state, private schools and Further Education Colleges into higher education needs to embrace the fact that targets and performativity are impacting on how students have learnt. Arguably, therefore, further research on the impact of the National Curriculum and an educational agenda that reflects target setting and performativity is important. Not only does it have the potential to support understanding of the consequences of English educational policy in this area, but also allows those in higher education to reconceptualise how they scaffold student transitions to enhance the

student experience, their understanding of the demands of higher education and hopefully retention, student achievement and satisfaction.

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