



# University of HUDDERSFIELD

## University of Huddersfield Repository

Armstrong, Christine

An evaluation of initiatives implemented to support undergraduate students' transition into Higher Education at one post-1992 university

### Original Citation

Armstrong, Christine (2015) An evaluation of initiatives implemented to support undergraduate students' transition into Higher Education at one post-1992 university. *Fields: journal of Huddersfield student research*, 1 (1). e10. ISSN 2057-0163

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/23081/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: [E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk](mailto:E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk).

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

# **An evaluation of initiatives implemented to support undergraduate students' transition into Higher Education at one post-1992 university**

**Christine Armstrong**

Email: [chrisarmstrong2@gmail.com](mailto:chrisarmstrong2@gmail.com)

## **Abstract**

Supporting students in the transition to Higher Education is crucial to improving retention. Set in a post-1992 university, admitting a high proportion of students from a widening participation background, this paper analyses first year undergraduate students' experience of their transition and, in particular, the initiatives implemented to support them. Through questionnaires and focus groups with students and interviews with course leaders, the study identifies the importance of pre-entry and first year engagement in helping students make proactive decisions, develop realistic expectations and integrate both socially and academically. A number of initiatives were evaluated and these were largely positive with the majority successfully managing the transition. However, student transition and retention is multi-faceted and this paper demonstrates the challenges post-1992 universities face in supporting a diverse student body. Nevertheless, areas of good practice were identified, including opportunities for social integration during induction and the use of course social network sites.

**Keywords:** student transition, student retention, post-1992 university, induction, first year experience, academic integration, social integration, social networking

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5920/fields.2015.1110>

Article copyright: © 2014 Christine Armstrong. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



## **Introduction**

Over recent years, improving student retention has become a priority for the Higher Education (HE) sector (National Audit Office (NAO), 2007) and, particularly, for post-1992 universities, many of whom enrol a high proportion of students from a widening participation background and who, in some cases, have a lower than average retention rate (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2014). A number of studies have found supporting undergraduate students in the transition to HE can be crucial to improving retention rates (Yorke & Longden, 2008). By reporting on the findings of a small-scale study, set in a post-1992 university in the north of England (hereafter referred to as the University), this paper aims to improve understanding of students' transition and evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives implemented to support this transition.

The University is committed to widening access to HE and, consequently, enrolls a high proportion of students from social groups who are under-represented in HE, resulting in a diverse student body with differing past educational experience. To support these students' transition, the University has implemented a number of initiatives, both pre-entry and during the first year, including open days; web-based information; social network sites; induction programmes and interaction with current students. Through exploring the experiences and perceptions of first year students and their course leaders, this paper examines experiences of student transition into HE and evaluates the initiatives that aim to support transition. Students on Bachelors degree courses were chosen as the subject of the research as they make up the majority of the University's undergraduate provision.

The first section of this paper discusses some of the literature around student retention, providing a context for the study, moving on to highlight some of the initiatives offered by other universities to support transition. This is followed by an outline of the research study and an overview of the findings, discussed under the key themes of expectations and decision making; academic integration; social integration and social networking. The study highlights the challenges faced by many post-1992 universities in supporting a diverse student body in the transition to HE and, at the same time, demonstrates the value of pre-entry and first year engagement in supporting students to make proactive decisions, develop realistic expectations and integrate both socially and academically. The paper concludes by identifying areas of good practice, and recommends that course teams could explore providing extended induction programmes, incorporating opportunities for social integration, and utilising course social network sites to facilitate academic and social integration.

## **Literature Review**

### **Context**

The HE landscape has changed significantly over recent years; firstly, with government commitment to increasing and widening participation (NAO, 2007), followed more recently by government funding reform (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2011). Consequently, many post-1992 universities are now enrolling a greater number of students from social groups who were previously under-represented in HE (Sanders & Higham, 2012) who may lack the skills and confidence for a successful transition (Hussey & Smith 2010). Supporting such a diverse student body can be challenging (Kift, 2008) and there is, as Thomas (2012) highlights, a commitment in the sector to ensuring this diversity does not result in a decline in retention rates.

Much of the literature around student retention concentrates on transition, such as the early work of Tinto (1975), focussing on social and academic integration, to more recent studies, such as Yorke and Longden (2008), concentrating on the first year experience and transition into HE. Studies show, not only is the first year experience important, the relationship with the student prior to entry is also crucial in helping students with decision-making, managing expectations and preparing for academic study (Thomas, 2011). In his later work Tinto (1993), cited in Darlastan-Jones, Cohen, Haunold, Pike & Young (2003), acknowledges the role of the university, as well as high schools, family and peers, in helping students integrate into university life. This is widely recognised in other literature, both from government (NAO, 2007) and other universities (see, for example, Teesside Retention Team, 2005) and there is now a greater acknowledgement among many institutions that they may need to "...change themselves rather than wishing for a more homogenous or traditional student body" (Thomas & Jamieson-Ball, 2011, p12), a sentiment echoed by Cook (2007, cited in NAO, 2007, p.30) who says "we need to teach the students we recruit, not the ones we would have liked to recruit".

### Reasons for leaving

In order for universities to help students successfully integrate they need to understand the factors causing a student to consider leaving their course of study (Gazeley & Aynsley, 2012). The NAO (2007, p.25) found the most commonly cited reasons for withdrawing from a course of study included "lack of integration"; however, as Assister and Gibbs (2007) highlight, students generally need to provide one reason for withdrawal when completing forms, whereas it is likely to be a more multi-phenomenon. This is supported by other studies, such as Yorke and Longden (2004) and Teesside Retention Team (2005), which found there were usually several reasons for withdrawal, often linked to transition.

The decisions students make regarding taking a course of study at university can have a significant impact on retention (Murtagh, 2012), with Yorke and Longden (2004, p.134) finding, "...flawed decision-making about entering the course" as one of the reasons students leave university. Similarly, Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) found students who successfully completed their course had made a proactive decision to study that course, often linked to career ambitions; whereas those who had dropped out of university had generally made a reactive decision, such as university being a natural progression from school/college or pressure from family and friends. According to Murtagh (2012), many students receive poor information regarding university study, which affects their decision making. However, universities can help students by providing effective pre-entry information and open days which can, as Macintosh, Cook and Rushton (2006) propose, be used to help students make informed decisions about university. In addition, it is important there is also "a good fit between the ... [student's] prior expectations and those within the HE context" (Gazeley & Aynsley, 2012, p.3) as any disparity between students' expectations and the reality of university can be challenging for some students (Cook, Rushton & Macintosh, 2006). As Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) explain, such disparities may occur where students form expectations of university based on stereotypical images such as a lively social life with little study. Consequently, as Murtagh (2012) stresses, universities have an important role in ensuring students understand the expectations of them when at university.

Academic preparedness can be another significant factor in improving retention (Gazeley & Aynsley, 2012) and, as Crisp et al (2009) highlight, many students find

adapting to a different level and type of guidance and potentially reduced support from tutors particularly challenging. Although students generally expect to receive less support, Rowley, Hartley and Larkin (2008) found that they still found this adjustment difficult with Beaumont, O'Doherty and Shannon (2011) identifying the way students are assessed and prepare assessments as one of the major gaps. This is echoed by Salisbury and Karasmanis (2011) who found that students may not possess the information literacy or referencing skills that universities expect. Therefore, many post-1992 universities may need to adapt to the changing needs of students (Leese, 2010) while still aspiring to "... produce students who think and learn independently ... [and no longer assuming] that they will arrive already able to do so" (Cook, no date, p.5).

#### Initiatives implemented by universities

It is now widely accepted that universities have a crucial role to play in enhancing students' transition into HE (Thomas, 2013). However, despite "a wealth of research about student retention and success" it is "difficult to translate this knowledge into activities that impact on student persistence and success..." (Thomas, 2012, p.8), perhaps because, as Cook and Rushton (2009, p.1) highlight, there is no "single solution to the problems of student attrition". Nonetheless, across the UK, universities are undertaking activities to endeavour to support students' transition including pre-entry initiatives such as open events (Murtagh, 2012) and enhanced induction programmes (Cook et al, 2006; Richardson & Tate, 2012).

Thomas (2012) recommends engagement with students prior to entry should include social interaction with peers, existing students and staff from academic and support departments and provide prospective students with information to help them develop realistic expectations and improve their academic skills. Today's diverse student body may have differing educational experiences and expectations about university study (Maunder et al, 2010) and may find it difficult to make informed decisions about their study (Thomas, 2011). Open days at many universities have evolved from having a short-term focus to attract students to a more diverse offering including activities designed to support students' longer-term decision-making. For example, one faculty at the University of Manchester requires all applicants to attend an open day, incorporating an interview with a member of academic staff and informal chats with student ambassadors, before being offered a place (Richardson, 2009). Although seemingly resource intensive, Richardson (2009) believes this will be outweighed by improved retention as the interviews, and opportunity to talk to student ambassadors, help students make an informed choice.

In addition to using open days to support decision making, many universities are exploring other ways they can engage with students about the requirements for HE study in order to better align expectations and reality. For example, Loughborough University has used social networking to engage with students prior to entry (Ribchester, Wakefield & Miller, 2012). Using a bespoke, university-created social network they found that using such a site can encourage "familiarity with peers, tutors, place of study and the university academic experience" and "...can act as an effective transitional space by bringing together aspects of the familiar and unfamiliar" (Ribchester et al, 2012, p.455). Northumbria University has also used social networking to facilitate academic adjustment and trained second year students as mentors to work alongside academic staff to create resources which they felt would be useful to new students (Smailes, 2012). Feedback showed that students found the practical resources useful and had developed good relationships with their peers, yet only a minority felt it

had directly made them feel more comfortable about starting the university; nevertheless, the majority still felt they had chosen the right university (Smailes, 2012).

Once students join the university, induction is of critical importance in their transition (Yorke & Longden, 2004) and can, as Yamnikar (2006, p1) points out, "...mean the difference between retaining and losing [students]". Recognising this, some universities are moving away from the traditional week giving students vast amounts of information via timetabled sessions, to a more holistic programme of events with the aim of enabling students to integrate into university life, both academically and socially (Thomas 2013). Nottingham Trent University has developed a programme encompassing academic, social, sporting and cultural activities designed to help students "orientate themselves to the University, start building friendship groups and constructing their own support networks", which has received positive feedback from students who welcomed the opportunity to form friendships (Foster, Lowther, Hardy, Kirby & Molineaux, 2012, p.28). However, induction should be considered "a process not an event" and it should be noted that students are unlikely to remember much, if any, of the information they are given during induction (Cook & Rushton, 2008, p37); therefore, universities may wish to consider an extended induction, such as that offered at Newcastle University to minimise information overload (Richardson & Tate, 2013).

The literature informed the methods for the research study, summarised in the next section, and highlights the multi-faceted nature of student retention in HE and, at the same time, demonstrates how pre-entry and first year initiatives can help students' transition. Such initiatives aim to help students make well-informed choices about university study; integrate both socially and academically and develop the necessary academic skills. Although some of these initiatives have been evaluated and received positive feedback suggesting they are effective in supporting students' transition, many are small-scale localised studies and may not necessarily apply to other universities with a different student population and course portfolio. Additionally, others have no formal evidence of their effectiveness, possibly suggesting such initiatives are difficult to evaluate. Furthermore some initiatives, for example interviewing all prospective students, have significant resource implications for universities whose staff, as Court and Kinman (2008) highlight, are already feeling the pressures of a heavy workload.

## **Method**

### **Data collection**

A mixed-methods approach was taken for this small-scale study with a sequential strategy used for collecting the primary data, enabling the focus of the research to be refined at each stage (Heaton, 2004). Ethical approval was gained from the University of Huddersfield's School of Education and Professional Development prior to commencing the study and all participants gave voluntary informed consent before data was collected. Data was collected through exploratory interviews with course leaders, followed by questionnaires and focus groups with students. Mainly qualitative data was collected, with a small amount of quantitative data collected via questionnaire to help identify the discussion topics for the focus groups. Purposive sampling was used to identify four courses, as representative as possible of full-time Bachelor's courses at the University. A questionnaire was circulated to all students, resulting in a total of 123 out of 169 completed questionnaires (a rate of 72%); and, for each course, one mini focus group of between 3 and 6 members; and one semi-structured interview with the course leader. The demographic of the student sample was 76% female, 24% male and 82% aged 21 & under and 18% over 22.

Data collection took place in three stages during the academic year 2013/14. Initially, at the end of the first semester, one-to-one semi-structured exploratory interviews were conducted with course leaders to explore their experiences of students' transition into HE and the initiatives offered to their students during this transition. Once this data had been collected and analysed, data was subsequently collected from student participants in two stages in the first few weeks of the second semester. Firstly, this was done by surveying students about their experiences of their transition into HE and the initiatives put in place to support them. Questions were informed by the one-to-one interviews and covered students' experiences prior to joining the University and during their first semester. In order to maximise completion rates, a similar approach to that employed by Teesside Retention Team (2005), in a comparable study, was used and students were asked to complete the questionnaire in a taught session. For ease of completion in a classroom, participants completed a hard copy of the questionnaire; however, the results were input into the Bristol Online Survey (Bristol Online Surveys, (n.d.)) for analysis. The results of the questionnaire, alongside the results from the one-to-one interviews and the literature review, informed the final stage of data collection - the focus group discussions. In order to address an anticipated difficulty in recruiting participants, four mini-focus groups of between three to six people were held, which are easier to recruit and can be more comfortable for participants (Kreuger & Casey, 2000).

#### Data Analysis

Constant Comparative Analysis (CCA) was used to analyse the results from the one-to-one interviews and focus groups. Once themes capturing the meaning of the data had been identified, network analysis was used to explore how the themes connect with one another. The data from the questionnaires was exported into Microsoft Excel to facilitate analysis.

#### Findings

Findings are discussed under the key themes of expectations and decision making; academic integration; social integration and social networking. Quotes from participants are used for illustrative purposes and to deepen understanding (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006). Codes in brackets following quotations indicate whether they are from questionnaires with students (Q); focus groups with students (FG1-4) or interviews with course leaders (Int1-4).

#### Students' overall experiences of the transition to HE

The majority of students surveyed (63%) said they found the transition to HE quite easy or very easy (Q), with students commenting "it's been pretty easy" (FG4) and the experience was "better than I expected" (FG1), supporting Sheridan and Dunne's (2012, p.237) observations that "...the majority of students make a successful transition to higher level education". However, it should be noted that a significant number (37%) also found the transition quite difficult or very difficult (Q), in line with Cook et al's (2006) findings that some students do find the transition more challenging. It is these students, struggling to integrate and adapt to university study, who could be at risk of not completing their first year (NAO, 2007).

As Teesside Retention Team (2005, p.5) found, "particular issues can affect different students in different ways" and this disparity among student experiences was evident throughout the findings. Consequently, supporting the needs of a diverse group of students can be challenging (Kift, 2008). Nevertheless, the findings showed much is being done, both centrally and at course level, pre and post entry, to help manage

students' expectations; support their decision making and to help them integrate academically and socially.

#### Expectations and decision making

The expectations students have, and the decisions they make about university study can have a significant impact on their transition (Hussey and Smith, 2010). The findings from the interviews showed that through pre-entry material, such as the website and prospectus, along with open days and interview days, course leaders are endeavouring to give students a realistic picture of studying at the University. On the whole, the prospectus and website appeared to have little impact for many students, although a minority found the website very useful, providing an accurate view of the course and the University.

Course leaders are using open days to help students decide whether the course "is the right course for them..." (Int1) and "give them a flavour of what they are likely to get" (Int3). Approximately half of focus group participants had visited the University prior to starting their course and this appeared to have had a little more impact than the prospectus and website. However, many had attended for a different course from that which they finally enrolled on. In some cases this was due to not meeting the entry criteria for their initial course choice but others simply changed their mind. This may suggest that for some the open days had been useful in helping them decide the course was not right for them and helping them find something more suitable, for example "...that was when my mind was changed to [a different course]... 'cos I spoke to [the course leader]" (FG4).

Only one of the courses required students to have an interview and participants found this experience useful and enjoyable, with one commenting, "...when I came here I just thought 'wow, this is where I want to be'" (FG2). Others commented it was different to other universities as it was "...more friendly..." (FG2) and gave the opportunity to "...get to know each other a bit" (FG2) and also allowed them to meet with existing students who had been helpful in giving practical insights such as "what it's like moving away and being in a flat together..." (FG2). This supports Richardson's (2009, p.142) findings that allowing applicants to talk to current students can help them "form a realistic view of the courses and student experience...".

Many students had invested time and effort preparing for university, by viewing the website and attending open days and interviews. The findings suggest that they are, for the most part, having a positive impact on students' decision making, with 81% of students identifying proactive reasons for choosing university, such as "to gain further knowledge of a field that personally I was interested in" (FG1). However, it was not clear from the findings how effective this engagement had been in managing expectations, with students arriving with mixed expectations about academic study such as "Obviously you expect it to be something... more than school but at the same time you don't think it's going to be like as a hard a change as what it is" (FG3) and, conversely, "... it's a lot easier than I thought it would be" (FG4). This supports Jackson and Livesey's (2014) observations of the diversity and complexity of the student body and the challenges universities face in implementing initiatives that work for all.

It was clear from the findings that a minority did not engage in the pre-entry initiatives, with one participant commenting, "I just kind of applied and chose this as my first choice and that's it until the results day, until I actually started I didn't really think about it. I just



turned up!" (FG3). Nevertheless, none of these students felt it had an impact on their transition to university although, as students had just completed one semester, the impact of this may not be fully known. Despite recent literature, such as Gazeley and Aynsley (2012), placing much of the responsibility on the institution for engaging students prior to entry, the findings highlight the difficulties universities can face in persuading students to take up such opportunities. One student commented, "Yeah we need to do it. It's not up to the Uni really. I was just too lazy" (FG3).

The findings demonstrate the commitment of the university and individual course leaders in supporting students to make informed decisions and manage expectations, and the initiatives implemented appear to have been useful for a number of students - particularly the interview day and the opportunity to speak to existing students. However, it was difficult to evaluate their success in managing expectations, with students arriving at University with mixed and, in some cases, unrealistic expectations. In addition, some students had not taken the opportunity to engage with any of the initiatives. All of this highlights the difficulties of evaluating such initiatives (Thomas, 2012) and, as Gazeley and Aynsley (2012) found, the difficulties many post-1992 universities face in meeting the differing needs of a complex and diverse student population.

#### Academic Integration

Although many students enjoy their academic study, the transition from school or college to HE is challenging for many, with 70% of students citing academic aspects such as the "big change from writing essays at A Level to essays at university" (Q) as being the most difficult aspects of their first semester. Similarly, focus group participants identified particular challenges around the differences in essay writing and referencing, for example "...we've never done referencing at my high school at all so it was just like completely new to me when I came here" (FG3) and this was supported by one of the course leaders, who commented "referencing is totally alien to them" (Int3). In addition to academic writing, two of the focus groups (FG3 and FG4) found information technology (IT) platforms, such as Blackboard and Pebblepad particularly problematic. Comments included "...the worst to get your head round is like Blackboard, I still can't even work it now" (FG3). This may suggest that although the typical student generation are often considered digital natives (Helsper & Eynon, 2011), some students may not, as Smith et al (2013) argue, possess the necessary IT skills for university-level study.

The findings showed that course leaders are introducing students to these skills in induction week but, as Cook and Rushton (2008) found, students often struggle to remember much of the information they receive during their first week. This was recognised by the majority of course leaders, leading them to change their induction programmes in recent years, with comments such as "we used to do it pretty full on but we used to frighten them so we don't do it like that anymore" (Int2). The findings from the questionnaires show that this is effective for most students with 85% stating that the amount of information they received in their first week was "about right". However, the findings from the focus groups were more mixed with some feeling they could have had more information on certain areas, as one student commented "I think we could have got more information on like Blackboard and stuff like that..." (FG4), supporting Smith et al's (2013) findings that students may need more support to develop the required information literacy skills. Others felt they had received a lot of information, with comments such as "it was quite a lot of information to take in..." (FG1) and "... the amount of stuff they throw at us..." (FG3).

It was clear that, for many, freshers' activities had taken priority during the first week and this may have affected how much information could be assimilated during that week, "...cos it was freshers' I can't remember much" (FG3). Although course leaders are not offering a formal extended induction, such as that highlighted earlier, there is a recognition that induction is "a process not an event" (Cook and Rushton, 2008, p37) and all are reinforcing information given during that first week at appropriate points during the first semester. However, as Kift (2008, p.12) found, implementing an induction programme to meet the needs of a diverse group of students is an "enormously complex undertaking", and despite the reinforcement of information and skills development throughout the semester some students still felt they needed more support, such as with IT platforms. Others seem to have missed some information altogether. Although all course leaders reported giving their students opportunities to meet their personal tutor during their first week, which is critical in supporting students' integration (Thomas, 2012), some students were either unaware of their personal tutor or indeed what a personal tutor is, as one participant questioned "What are they for though? What do you do with them?" (FG2) and others had only recently found out about such arrangements.

The findings show that course teams are addressing this by reinforcing information and skills development throughout the semester, and not overloading students with too much information during their first week. However, it was apparent that after one semester some students still were not confident with certain academic skills and others were unaware of important information. While many students will develop the necessary skills and confidence during their first year, for many post-1992 universities who enrol students with varied past educational experience, there is a risk that this will not be the case for all and could impact on their successful completion of the first year. In order to minimise this risk, a more formal extended induction programme could be considered, such as that implemented at Newcastle University (Richardson & Tate, 2013), although the resource implications of this need to be considered.

### Social integration

The significance of social integration was evident from findings which showed that 72% of students enjoyed meeting new people or engaging in Freshers' social activities during their first week (Q); and, in the first semester, 52% enjoyed meeting new people and making friends (Q). Some participants had been surprised by how easy they had found the transition and attributed this to the size and friendliness of the campus, "...it's sort of close knit, everyone's really nice with each other..." (FG4). However, for some, social integration proved to be more difficult with 28% of students stating meeting new people had been challenging in their first week, for example one participant felt "...lonely and under pressure to conform" (Q). With social drinking often perceived as the norm among university students (Barrass, 2012), it is perhaps not surprising that those students who prefer not to drink alcohol may feel "lonely and excluded now and then because it was freshers and I rarely drink" (Q).

Among course leaders, there were mixed views about the role of the course team in supporting students' social integration, with one relying solely on Freshers' activities to enable to students to integrate socially rather than using the course induction. This was partly attributed to logistical constraints, such as "the timetable and trying to get rooms", and pressures on staff time, "it's a busy time for us" (Int3). The majority, however, have moved to holistic induction programmes encompassing team-building activities and social events, as well as some traditional information giving sessions, with a view to

enabling students to integrate both socially and academically. The focus group participants who had experienced such a programme particularly enjoyed the opportunities to “meet each other before we started the course” (FG1). One participant commented:

if I hadn't have met any of you in like an informal environment, just doing games and things, when it came to the first day I'd have been really nervous and I probably would have tried some way of getting out of going. (FG2)

However, participants who had taken part in a more traditional induction week did not feel they had integrated with many other students in their course group. For example, one participant commented:

Everyone's so nervous to talk to everybody else, you find your little group, when you go out you stay in that group so like there's a lot of people in my class I don't even know their names. You don't talk to them because you haven't associated with them at all. (FG3)

These participants would have welcomed the opportunity to take part in more social activities, with one commenting it would have helped in the first week “...if something was put on purely for our course and we all went and like met in a bar” or something in class to get to know one another's names (FG3). This supports Foster et al's (2012) findings that students welcome the opportunity to build friendships with their peers during induction week. However, as discussed earlier, social activities focussing on alcohol may not cater for all and may isolate those students who do not drink alcohol for cultural, health, religious or personal reasons. Consequently, it is important that any activities provided by course teams are inclusive and take into consideration the diverse nature of the student body.

The logistical and resourcing challenges associated with incorporating team-building and social activities into induction programmes also need to be considered, not least the impact on academic staff workload. However, course leaders who had incorporated a variety of orientation and team-building sessions into their induction programme found the group to be “the most cohesive we've had in a long time” (Int1), an important characteristic of student success (Cook et al, 2006). Therefore, course teams could explore incorporating activities to enhance social integration into their induction programmes and may, as White and Carr (2005) found, find that there are significant benefits to this, both to the students and to the course teams.

### Social networking

Social networking sites appeared to have a major influence on students' social integration, both pre and post entry. As discussed in the literature review, some universities have used social networking sites to support prospective students in the transition to HE (Ribchester et al, 2012) and the University has a number of Facebook and Twitter sites – some managed by the University and/or course teams, and others created and managed by current or prospective students. Approximately two-thirds of focus group participants had used social network sites to communicate with other prospective students, finding it useful to get to know others on their course and in their accommodation, commenting it made them “a bit more confident starting the course knowing you know people there” (FG4). Conversely, participants in one group didn't feel

at all comfortable talking to other new students through this medium, preferring to “meet them for the first time... [without] preconceptions” (FG2). This supports Jackson’s (2012) findings that, although engaging with social network sites prior to entry doesn’t suit all, it can enhance social integration for those who choose to use them and can, in particular, help students feel less nervous about starting university.

The use of course social network sites continues once students start their course, with virtually all focus group participants using Facebook, in particular, to chat to fellow students about their studies, for example:

We have group chats on Facebook and everything. As soon as one person gets confused they’re like ‘hey does anyone know what they’re doing?’ and everyone’s like ‘no we don’t’ and someone will just pop up and say ‘oh you do this.’ (FG2)

Participants found this to be very useful, commenting,  
“It’s actually quite good isn’t it? Cos if I’m asking a question you can guarantee someone will have wrote on it the question that I was thinking and I just read the comments on there...” (FG4).

There were, however, very mixed views among course leaders about their impact. One course leader believed very strongly that their course Facebook site, which is managed by the course team, had a positive impact on students’ social integration, whilst others were less comfortable using such technologies with their students. One, in particular, was concerned that Facebook can “...encourage some of the bitchiness which you do find, certainly in the first year, when they’re all busy jockeying for position” and had previous experience of Facebook “damaging people...” (Int4). These are valid concerns, as Kwan and Skoric (2013) highlight, with the increasing use of social networking, in some cases, leading to cyberbullying. Although generally considered to be a problem among school-age children, Wanda Cassidy, interviewed in Canada’s *The Chronicle Journal*, found that it is also happening among undergraduate students (Luk, 2014). As JISC Legal (2013, p2) stress, universities need to be aware of their legal safeguarding responsibilities and “have procedures in place to handle incidents of unacceptable Facebook usage”.

One of the course leaders felt strongly that Facebook can leave academic staff open “...to an awful lot of manipulation” (Int4) and “leads to massive confusion...” (Int4) by conflicting with information given by the course team, “...Facebook is set up in competition with the announcements I’m putting on Blackboard which is telling them the right stuff...” (Int4). The findings from one focus group suggests that this may be the case, as one student commented “...on the Facebook group people were saying they needed 500 extra words... but we’d never heard of it [from their tutor]” (FG4). In contrast, where the course team were managing the Facebook site, the course leader found they were able to deal with any potential confusion, for example, “...the other day someone couldn’t get on to Turnitin and they just put a message on Facebook... because all the Facebook things come directly to my phone... I could immediately get back and say ‘let me look into this’” (Int1). Although there can be concerns over negative messages being publicly available, as Reuben (2008) explains, by being involved in the discussions, the course team can manage any negativity or confusion.

Overall, the findings showed that social network sites appear to help many students integrate socially both prior to entry and during the first year and, for many, they are a welcome source of peer support, and an effective communication tool. However, there are also risks, for example bullying and miscommunication (Kwan & Skorik, 2013) and potential confusion and conflict for staff. Nevertheless, where such sites are managed by the course team they could be seen as an example of good practice although, as Reuben (2008) highlights, there is a significant time commitment for staff associated with managing such sites. Therefore, any decision to create a social network site must be very carefully considered, and as McEwan (2011, p.18) advises, course teams could "...consider embracing Facebook for the good things it contributes to student integration while at the same time preparing for some of Facebook's more negative consequences" (McEwan, 2011, p.18).

## **Conclusion**

This paper provides a valuable insight into students' experiences of the transition to HE at a post-1992 university and, in particular, the initiatives implemented to support them. On the whole, students' experiences appeared to be generally positive, with the majority successfully managing the transition. The findings demonstrate the importance of academic and social integration, and support the findings of Tinto (1975) and more recent studies such as Yorke and Thomas (2010). However, students' experiences were quite mixed in terms of both social and academic integration, with some struggling to integrate with their peers and with academic writing, referencing and information literacy. This demonstrates the challenges universities and course leaders at post-1992 universities face in meeting the needs of a diverse study body. Nevertheless, the findings showed that, on the whole, the University and individual course teams are committed to supporting students' transition and have implemented a number of initiatives, both pre entry and during the first year.

These initiatives were analysed and evaluated from both students' and course leaders' perspectives and examples of good practice identified. Firstly, pre-entry engagement aiming to support students in making informed decisions and manage expectations appeared to have been useful for many students, with open days and interview days having most impact, particularly where students had the opportunity to meet with existing students. However, it was difficult to evaluate how successful this engagement had been in managing student expectations, with students arriving at university with mixed and, in some cases, unrealistic expectations. In addition, some students had not taken the opportunity to engage with any of these initiatives. All of this highlights the difficulties of evaluating such initiatives and, again, the challenge many post-1992 universities face in meeting the different needs of a complex and diverse student population.

Once students start University, they have mixed views about induction in terms of the amount of information they receive, highlighting the challenges of providing an induction programme that meets the needs of all students. While it is positive that course teams are reinforcing information throughout the semester, this does not seem to be meeting the needs of all, with some students feeling they need more academic skills support and some unaware of key information. This could be attributed in part to the distractions of fresher's activities impacting on attendance and concentration; nevertheless, there is a risk for many post-1992 universities that this could influence student retention. In order to minimise this risk, a more formal extended induction programme could be considered, although the resource implications of this need to be considered.

The importance of social integration is recognised by the majority of course leaders who have incorporated team-building and social activities into induction programmes, and findings suggest these are effective in helping students integrate socially. Although there are resource and logistical implications to running such sessions, the findings suggest there are significant benefits, with students finding such activities alleviate nerves, making them feel more comfortable among their peers, and course leaders have observed a more cohesive course group, which could benefit both students and the course team. Consequently, course teams could explore options for incorporating team-building and other social activities into their induction programme, while being mindful that the activities are as inclusive as possible for all students.

Social networking sites appear to have some influence on student transitions with the majority using course and University Facebook and Twitter sites. Although only one course team is using a social network site (Facebook) to support students' transition, students are using such sites, regardless, and many students find them useful for getting to know one another prior to joining their course, and to discuss their studies once on course. However, opinions among course leaders are mixed from strong beliefs that a course Facebook site has a very positive impact on social integration and course cohesion alongside concerns about bullying and miscommunication. The findings suggest that where sites are managed by staff, who can manage any miscommunication and negative behaviour, they can be very valuable; however, they do carry risks and have associated resource implications which any course team wishing to create a social network site must be prepared for and follow appropriate procedures (JISC Legal, 2013).

On the whole, the initiatives implemented seem to be having a positive impact on students' transition experience. The opportunities for social integration in induction programmes had been particularly effective, supporting the findings of other studies such as Foster et al (2012), and these could be further enhanced, as Richardson and Tate (2013) propose, by extending the programme into the year. The use of course social network sites, where overseen by course teams, also had a positive impact on student transition, supporting the findings of Ribchester et al (2012). However, as Kift (2008) found, the study recognises the complexity of supporting a diverse student body in the transition to HE and, consequently, the knowledge that what works for one course or one university may not necessarily work for another, with a different student population and course portfolio. Nonetheless, the study recommends course teams explore the following initiatives:

- extended induction programme, reinforcing key information and skills throughout the first semester or year;
- inclusive opportunities for social integration in induction programmes;
- course social network sites, overseen by course teams.

Each of these must be carefully considered as all have resource implications, particularly for academic staff workload, and also carry some risks, particularly in the case of social network sites.

Whilst the size and scope of the research upon which this paper is based means there are limits upon its generalisability, the findings provide an informative insight into student transition that could be explored in future research. Areas of particular interest

to focus on in more depth could be social integration, social network sites and induction programmes.

## References

- Assiter, A. & Gibbs, G.R. (2007). Student retention and motivation. *European Political Science*, 6, 79-93 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.eps.2210108> .
- Barrass, C. (2012). Drinking experiences of first year female students: using narratives to explore the transition to university life. (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from <http://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.581452>.
- Beaumont, C., O'Doherty, M. & Shannon, L. (2011). Reconceptualising assessment feedback: a key to improving student learning? *Studies in Higher Education*, 36(6) 1-17. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075071003731135>.
- Bristol Online Surveys. (n.d). *BOS: Bristol Online Surveys* Retrieved from: <https://www.survey.bris.ac.uk/>
- Cook, A. (no date). Heading them off at the pass: predicting retention problems. *The Higher Education Academy*. Retrieved from [http://jisctechdis.ac.uk/assets/documents/resources/database/id503\\_predicting\\_retention\\_problems.pdf](http://jisctechdis.ac.uk/assets/documents/resources/database/id503_predicting_retention_problems.pdf).
- Cook, A. & Rushton, B.S. (2009). *How to recruit and retain higher education students*. New York: Routledge.
- Cook, A. and Rushton, B.S. (2008). *Student Transition: Practices and Policies to Promote Retention*. SEDA paper no 121
- Cook, A., Rushton, B.S. & Macintosh, K.A. (2006). *Student Transition and Retention (STAR)*. University of Ulster. Retrieved from <http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star>.
- Corden, A. & Sainsbury, A. (2006). Using verbatim quotations in reporting qualitative social research: researchers' views. Retrieved from <https://www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/pubs/pdf/verbquotresearch.pdf>.
- Court, S. & Kinman, G. (2008). Tackling stress in Higher Education. University and College Union. Retrieved from [http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/d/0/ucu\\_hestress\\_dec08.pdf](http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/d/0/ucu_hestress_dec08.pdf).
- Crisp, G., Palmer, E., Turnbull, D., Nettelbeck, T., Ward, L., LeCouteur, A., Sarris, A., Strelan, P. & Schneider, L. (2009). First year student expectations: Results from a university-wide student survey. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*. 6 (1), 9-26. Retrieved from <http://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol6/iss1/3>.
- Darlaston-Jones, D., Cohen, L., Haunold, S., Pike, L. & Young, A. (2003). The retention and persistence support (RAPS) project: a transition initiative. *Edith Cowan University Research Online*. Retrieved from <http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks/3458>.

Department for Business, Innovation & Skills. (2011). *Higher Education: students at the heart of the system*. Retrieved from [www.official-documents.gov.uk](http://www.official-documents.gov.uk).

Foster, E., Lawther, S., Hardy, C., Kirby, R. & Molineaux, P. (2012). Nottingham Trent University's welcome week: a sustained course to improve early and academic transition for new students. In J. Andrews, R. Clark, & L. Thomas, L. (Eds), *Compendium of effective practice in higher education retention and success*. (pp.27-31). Birmingham: Aston University and York: HEA. Retrieved from <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/node/3015>.

Gazeley, L. & Aynsley, S. (2012). *The contribution of pre-entry interventions to student retention and success: a literature synthesis of the widening access, student retention and success national courses archive*. Retrieved from [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/WP\\_syntheses/six\\_literature\\_syntheses](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/WP_syntheses/six_literature_syntheses).

Heaton, J. (2004). *Reworking Qualitative Data*. Retrieved from <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com>.

Helsper, E. & Eynon, R. (2009). Digital natives: where is the evidence? *British Educational Research Journal*. 36 (3). 503-520. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01411920902989227>.

Higher Education Statistics Agency. (2014). *UK Performance Indicators in Higher Education*. Retrieved from [www.hesa.ac.uk/pis](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/pis).

Hussey, T. & Smith, P. (2010). "Transitions in HE". *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*. 47 (2). 2155-164. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14703291003718893>.

Jackson, A.V. & Livesey, K. (2012). Aligning expectations with reality: an online resource to help with the difficulties of school to university transition and early engagement with Higher Education. In J. Andrews, R. Clark, & L. Thomas, L. (Eds), *Compendium of effective practice in higher education retention and success*. (pp.47-40). Birmingham: Aston University and York: HEA. Retrieved from <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/node/3015>.

Jackson, V. (2012). The use of a social networking site with pre-enrolled Business School students to enhance their first year experience at university, and in doing so, improve retention. *Widening Participation & Lifelong Learning*. 14. 25-41. Retrieved from <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com>.

JISC Legal. (2013). *Facing up to Facebook: A Guide for FE and HE*. Retrieved from <http://www.jisclegal.ac.uk/ManageContent/ViewDetail/ID/2114.aspx>.

Kift, S.M. (2008). The next, great first year challenge: Sustaining, coordinating and embedding coherent institution-wide approaches to enact the FYE as "everybody's business". In *11th International Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference, An Apple for the Learner: Celebrating the First Year Experience, Hobart*. Retrieved from [http://www.fyhe.com.au/past\\_papers/papers08/FYHE2008/content/pdfs/Keynote%20-%20Kift.pdf](http://www.fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers08/FYHE2008/content/pdfs/Keynote%20-%20Kift.pdf).



Kreuger, R.A. & Casey, M. (2000). *Focus groups: a practical guide for applied research*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed). London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Kwan, G.C.E. & Skoric, M.M. (2013). Facebook bullying: An extension of battles in school. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29 (1) 16–25.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2012.07.014>.

Leese, M. (2010). Bridging the gap: supporting student transitions into higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 34 (2). 239-251.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03098771003695494>.

Luk, V. (2014). Cyberbullying on the rise at universities. *The Chronicle Journal*. Retrieved from <http://www.chroniclejournal.com/news/cp/national/cyberbullying-rise-universities>.

Macintosh, K.A., Cook, A. & Rushton, B.S. (2006). *Informing Students: Quality Information*. Retrieved from <http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star/>.

Maunder, R., Gingham, J. & Rogers, J. (2010). Transition in HE: exploring the experiences of first and second year psychology undergraduate students. *The Psychology of Education Review*, 34 (1) Retrieved from <http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/2734/>.

McEwan, B. (2011). Social Media for Social Research: Applications for Higher Education Communications. In L. Wankel, & C. Wankel (Eds) *Cutting-edge Technologies in Higher Education, Volume 2: Higher Education Administration with Social Media* (pp. 4-23). Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Murtagh, L. (2012). Enhancing preparation for Higher Education. *Practitioner Research in Higher Education*, 6 (1) 31-39. Retrieved from <http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/1330>.

National Audit Office. (2007). *Staying the Course: The retention of students in HE*. London: The Stationery Office. Retrieved from <http://www.nao.org.uk/>.

Ozga, J. & Sukhandan, L. (1998). Undergraduate non-completion: developing an explanatory model. *HE Quarterly*, 5 (2) 316-333. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1468-2273.00100>.

Reuben, R. (2008). *The use of social media in Higher Education for marketing and communications: a guide for professionals in Higher Education*. Retrieved from [http://www.fullerton.edu/technologyservices/\\_resources/pdfs/social-media-in-higher-education.pdf](http://www.fullerton.edu/technologyservices/_resources/pdfs/social-media-in-higher-education.pdf).

Ribchester, C., Wakefield, K. & Miller, G. (2012). Creating a transitional space for new students through pre-induction social networking. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 36 (3), 455-467. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2011.641172>.

Richardson, H. (2009). University visit days. In A. Cook & B.S. Rushton (Eds), *How to recruit and retain Higher Education students* (pp. 127-143) New York: Routledge.

Richardson, M.J. & Tate, S. (2012). Improving the transition to university: introducing student voices into the formal induction process for new geography undergraduates. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2013.769092>.

Rowley, M., Hartley, J. & Larkin, D. (2008). Learning from experience: the expectations and experiences of first-year undergraduate psychology students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 32 (4), 399-413. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03098770802538129>.

Salisbury, F. & Karasmanis, S. (2011). Are they ready? Exploring student information literacy skills in the transition from secondary to tertiary education. *Australian Academic & Research Libraries*, 42 (1), 43-58.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00048623.2011.10722203>.

Sanders, J. & Higham, L. (2012). *The role of Higher Education students in widening access, retention and success. a literature synthesis of the widening access, student retention and success national courses archive*. York: Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from  
[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/WP\\_syntheses/Sanders\\_Higham](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/WP_syntheses/Sanders_Higham).

Sheridan, V. & Dunne, S. (2012). The bigger picture: undergraduate voices reflecting on academic transition in an Irish university. *Innovations in Education & Teaching International*, 49 (3), 237-247. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2012.703019>.

Smailes, J. (2012). Bridging the gap between acceptance and enrolment: mentoring via social media. In J. Andrews, R. Clark, & L. Thomas, L. (Eds), *Compendium of effective practice in higher education retention and success*. (pp.12-15). Birmingham: Aston University and York: HEA. Retrieved from <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/node/3015>.

Smith, J.K., Given, L.M., Julien, H., Ouellette, D. & DeLong, K. (2013). Information literacy proficiency: assessing the gap in high school students' readiness for undergraduate academic work. *Library & Information Science Research*, 35 (2), 88-96.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2012.12.001>.

Teesside Retention Team. (2005). *Retaining Non-traditional Students in HE*. University of Teesside.

Thomas, L. (2011). Do pre-entry interventions such as 'aimhigher' impact on student retention and success? A review of the literature. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 65 (3), 230–250. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2010.00481.x>

Thomas, L. (2012). *Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change: final report from the what works? student retention & success course*. Retrieved from  
[https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/What\\_works\\_final\\_report.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/What_works_final_report.pdf).

Thomas, L. (2013). What Works? Facilitating an Effective Transition into Higher Education. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 14.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.14.S.4>

Thomas, L. & Jamieson-Ball, C. (2011). Engaging students to improve student retention and success in higher education in wales. *The Higher Education Academy*. Retrieved from [www.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk).

Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from HE: a theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*. 45 (1), 89-125. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org>.

White, S. & Carr, L. (2005). Brave new world: can we engineer a better start for freshers? *35th ASEE/IEEE Frontiers in Education Conference October 19 – 22, 2005, Indianapolis*. [online] doi: 10.1109/FIE.2005.1611959.

Yamnikar, J.A. (2006). *Increasing retention rates of new students by improving the induction process*. University of Central Lancashire. Retrieved from <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/cebe/documents/resources/casestudies/cebe/JohnAshtonYamnikar.pdf>.

Yorke, M. & Longden, B. (2008). *The First Year Experience of Higher Education in the UK*. Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from [www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/resources/publications/FYEFinalReport.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/resources/publications/FYEFinalReport.pdf).

Yorke, M. & Longden, B. (2004). *Retention & Student Success in Higher Education*. Bodmin: Open University Press.