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How to cite:

Tessarolo, Felipe; Aristeidou, Maria and Coughlan, Emily (2022). From face-to-face environments to distance learning universities: the transition period of first-year students. In: 8th International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd'22), Universitat Politècnica de València, Valencia pp. 917–924.

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.4995/HEAd22.2022.14531>

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From face-to-face environments to distance learning universities: the transition period of first-year students

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Abstract

The sudden transition from face-to-face into distance learning activities in higher education during the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to improve student induction and transition into distance learning settings. This study explores the experiences of first-year students at a distance learning university. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students, aged 18-19, who transitioned from a face-to-face environment (school, college or another university) to distance-learning higher education. Thematic analysis yielded themes related to students' early perceptions on distance-learning, experiences with learning and assessment, and social interactions. Noteworthy findings include students' early misconceptions of distance-learning, distance-learning as a shelter for students with mental health issues, views on hybrid learning and continuous assessment, and approaches to socialising. Insights from this study have implications for how universities with new and existing distance learning practices design their induction and support programmes to facilitate student transition and enhance the first-year student experience.

Keywords: *Distance-learning; learning experiences; first-year students; university induction; Covid-19; early perceptions.*

1. Introduction

The transition from school/college to university is a period in which individuals experience changes in various aspects of their lives. For young students, this can be especially stressful, as they are the protagonists of changes that affect the way they learn, their relationships and habits (Aristeidou, 2021; Parker et al., 2004). For instance, Rickinson and Rutherford (1995) identified that an abrupt change in the learning environment can generate anxiety in students especially when they leave a controlled environment like school and go to university and are treated as independent adults responsible for their learning. A survey by Cook and Lecky (1999), assessing attitudes to learning and expectations of university life of incoming students, found that students with A-levels (qualifications offered by schools and colleges focusing on academic subjects) consider themselves unprepared for higher education regarding study skills, private reading, time management, note taking, IT competence and team/project work. Research by Lowe and Cook (2003) with 691 first-year students identified that they did not feel prepared for university, whilst Hassel and Ridout (2018) discovered students struggle with the pace of learning and workload in higher education.

For students enrolling in a distance university course, further uncertainties may arise about the learning approach, socialisation in a virtual environment, assessments, and the presence of educators (Krasilnikov & Smirnova, 2017). However, the transition of students from school/college (or even a university with face-to-face learning) to distance learning has not yet been extensively investigated. The Covid-19 pandemic forced universities to rethink and adapt courses to a distance learning model and researchers have begun to investigate the topic. Previous works have identified actions such as conducting inductions, creating collaborative spaces and guidelines that could smooth out this transition period. For instance, Winnard and Elliott (2012) identified that induction can minimise feelings of isolation, bring students closer to their tutors and support staff, and also get them acclimatised to the VLE. In addition, Foley and Marr (2019) suggested the creation of extracurricular and collaborative activities in the distance-learning environment so that students can get to know each other and get closer to the educator. Lowe and Cook (2003) suggested the creation of guidelines to design support spaces.

This interview study addresses the research question (RQ): *“What are distance learning first-year university students’ experiences on their transition from school to university, learning and assessment, and social interactions?”* We conducted 12 interviews with first-year students, aged 18-19, at The Open University (OU), a UK-based university with an open entry system and a long tradition of distance learning. Findings from this research contribute to identifying the anxiety faced by younger students and suggest improvements for an ongoing induction. Our insights can be useful for improving the university and learning experiences of students who transition from a traditional learning environment (school or university) into a distance learning one.

2. Methods

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 first-year students, aged 18-19, across faculties at the OU. This study is part of a larger research project, which invited students to join a survey and, optionally, a follow up interview. Several findings from the, mainly quantitative, survey are reported elsewhere (e.g., Aristeidou, 2021). Ethical approval was obtained from the university ethics committee, and participation was voluntary.

2.1. Data collection

The interview protocol was created and piloted with two volunteers from the OU's Student Association prior to the start of the study. The interview involved questions related to the overall project's RQ, i.e., transition from school to university, learning and assessment experiences, and social interactions. The interviews were carried out online between March-April 2021. At the point of the interview, students had studied at least five months with the university and already submitted their first formative assignment. The 12 participating interviewees were eight females and four male students, three with declared disabilities and nine without, ten with A Levels and two without. These statistics are representative of the university's demographics. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymised.

2.2. Data analysis

Deductive and inductive approaches (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were followed to thematically analyse the interview data on nVivo. Some initial themes were pre-constructed, based on the project's research question (e.g., social interactions), while others were identified during the analysis (e.g., Covid-19 effects). Sub-themes and codes were set and identified by Author C after analysing a small number of transcripts; they were then verified and modified where necessary by Author B to ensure inter-rater reliability. The IRR was calculated according to Miles and Huberman (1994) by dividing the number of times both coders agreed by the total number of times coding was possible. The inter-rater percentage agreement reached 76%, which is considered acceptable. The two coders resolved disagreements by merging codes with similar meaning into a single theme, and creating a first version of the codebook. Author C analysed two more interviews, reaching an inter-rater agreement of 82% with the initial codebook, and some minor changes were made. The high percentage agreements are most likely due to all three authors being part of the larger project, having previous discussions and shared understanding. This work focuses on four themes, as these are specifically representative of first-year students, rather than the entire university population. These themes focus on students' early perceptions, learning and assessment, and social interactions.

3. Findings

Findings are structured according to three themes of analysis and data are presented and discussed by providing an account of participants' voices. Students' statements are illustrated by quotes, representing the perspectives of larger groups of interview participants.

3.1. Students' early perceptions

Pre-enrolment and early experiences are highlighted by all the students. In their narrations, they convey their initial perceptions on distance learning, their feelings towards this new 'trip', flexibility and accountability. A principal misconception in students' narrations was that learning activities would be completely digital, without further support, live tutorials, assigned tutors, interactive tasks or social activities. Several students expressed their positive surprise when they discovered that online learning was not 'boring', support levels were 'high' and "they were not left to their own devices in a way that feels like they are isolated".

Mixed emotions were expressed in relation to their enrolment in distance learning. Students felt 'relief' and 'worry'. Of the former, a surprisingly large number communicated experiences of bullying or extremely stressful situations in face-to-face settings and how these have been eliminated in distance-learning.

"I can't deal with like classroom environments because multiple reasons because of bullying and I had a teacher at school who basically said I was going to fail at everything in life. So it brings up anxiety." [Student 4]

However, as the literature suggests elsewhere (e.g., Krasilnikov & Smirnova, 2017), several students were also worried about their social lives and whether they would be able to develop new friendships: "I was like Oh, I'm going to be all by myself, studying with a bunch of people spread around the country." [Student 1]

Concerning their initial impressions of distance learning in the very first months, students discussed their feelings towards the setting's flexibility and being accountable for their studies. They commented on how previously their teachers were responsible to "gather all the learning resources for them", and "remind them of their responsibilities", and others expressed their satisfaction with the fact that they could now "prioritise their tasks", "not having someone telling them what to do", "not having a teacher shouting at them 'you haven't done this work'", and "doing things at their own pace". Students also added that being accountable for their studies allows them to gain skills such as "balancing their workload and work-life responsibilities".

Finally, students compared their university life to those of face-to-face universities, which they had either attended previously themselves or where their friends currently study. Students commented on the "limited support levels" of a particular university, or explained

that they “dislike commuting” and “spending unproductive time on campus”. As expected, the Covid-19 pandemic has also affected students’ university choices, with nearly all students explaining that “they were not going anywhere anyway”, “The OU is already adapted to distance learning” or even highlighting that face-to-face universities “just do what they are doing already, but putting it online”.

3.2 Learning and Assessment

The interview discussion focused on how they engage with learning and assessment in distance-learning settings. It involved students’ illustration of the available resources and material, how they engage with their tutors and tutorials, and their assessment experiences. Students highlighted their satisfaction on the multimedia aspect of online learning, focusing on the availability and variety of online resources, such as “having video clips to watch”, “having things to listen”, “a lot more online activities” and “not having to walk to the library, as everything is on my computer”. Interestingly, receiving physical books to complement or use as alternatives to online material was a positive surprise for students. The interviewees welcomed this unexpected resource, adding that they “like having a book to be able to write on” and this “really helped with the online learning in that it wasn’t all on a screen”.

“I thought it was going to be a little bit boring, looking online and reading a bit and then writing an essay and submitting it, but there’s videos, you’ve got your tutorials, [...] like there’s audio files and everything in the module. You can use the materials either like in physical form or online, depending on how you learn.” [Student 1]

The interviewees also discussed the role of tutor and the importance of tutorials and tutor groups (small groups supported by a tutor). Students emphasised the value of having a dedicated tutor to support them “because you are kind of on your own doing it so having someone is really nice”. Positive impressions noted how tutors can be contacted via email or phonecall, without having to visit their office, and how quickly most of the tutors respond online. Interviewees then examined differences between school and their current tutors. On the one hand, commenting that schoolteachers helped them feel confident by providing higher levels of guidance in their studies and on the other hand criticising “spoon-fed” approaches to learning. Other differences between the two settings were outlined, such as being trusted to complete your tasks and having to read through the material yourself.

Interviewees also described the role of tutor groups on forums, in engaging them with a small group of students and receiving support to course-related questions. They explained that engaging with tutor(s) and other students can be expanded via tutorials, in which you can receive extra support (such as handouts) discuss the material, and access other viewpoints:

Compared to other distance-learning aspects, assessment was reported to be the most challenging to manage. Several students highlighted the fact that schoolteachers would

ensure they were prepared for assessment, providing them with detailed guidance via smaller tasks and examples. However, even the students who reported feeling challenged by the absence of that guidance, agreed that the continuous assessment and feedback aspect of their distance-learning studies along with their flexible learning schedule allowed them to improve their academic and work-life balance skills.

“I think the assessments are really good because the fact that it is continuous over the thing and you know you are kind of doing a few chapters then getting feedback, and it is not just feedback on the topic but also how you are writing up your work and how you are communicating it, and that kind of constant feedback is much more helpful than do a whole year’s worth of working and then just do an assessment.” [Student 6]

3.3 Interactions

Means and challenges of interaction in distance-learning education, as well as a sense of belonging were main topics discussed by the respondents. Students mentioned a number of ‘university official’ means by which they can interact with their tutors and fellow students, such as course discussion forums and tutor groups, university clubs, and videoconferencing software (e.g., Skype, Adobe Connect). However, they also discussed how student-initiated social network groups (mainly WhatsApp, Facebook) enhance communication with fellow students. The latter was linked to challenges in interaction that, as expected, students were facing. These challenges, as perceived by students, were mainly linked to socialising for fun rather than study purposes. One of the challenges that nearly all of the interviewees reported was identifying people closer to their age for socialising, as distance-learning universities usually accommodate people of older ages.

“[...] I was probably one of the youngest people on my course so a lot of them were older, they were in kind of work, they had families, they had children, you know, so I didn't feel like I really kind of related to the people on my course.” [Student 2]

Some of the students reported feeling part of an academic community and enjoying "having discussions with people about the OU". Further, students described enhancing their sense of belonging by buying university branded products and following official social media stories. However, others explained that they do not feel integrated into a community, with the main reasons relating to social differences (such as age and personal circumstances) as well as a difficulty in connecting with people without more direct interactions.

“If you're not hearing someone's voice or seeing someone's face I think for me I struggle to build up that sense of community because they're just names onscreen whereas I guess if you did a kind of like, like a Skype or whatever like Adobe whatever it's called, Connect and if you could see people and talk to people...”. [Student 2]

Finally, others explained that they never aimed to be part of a university community, as they prefer to focus on studies and "go to university and do the work".

4. Discussion

This study explored the experiences of first-year students at a distance-learning university, during the Covid-19 pandemic, via semi-structured interviews. The main themes identified were students' early perceptions, experiences with learning and assessment, and interactions.

The evidence from this study supports previous research (Krasilnikov & Smirnova, 2017) suggesting that the transition from school/college to university can be more challenging for students in a distance-learning university. This study indicates that further to transitioning to a less controlled environment (that requires advanced study skills) distance-learning students are also expected to conform to new ways of learning and interacting. This is particularly evident in our study, which while deductively exploring students' experiences on transition uncovered themes relevant, but less visible, to their transition (e.g., challenges with new ways of assessment). These themes identified how conforming with these new ways of online learning and interaction can be part of students' transition challenges. Interestingly many students prior to joining distance-learning have misconceptions as to what it involves. This finding can provide evidence for distance-learning universities planning their 'open days' and induction activities, to include a better 'snapshot' of how life as a distance-learning student can be. Another noteworthy result was that distance-learning has been perceived as a 'shelter' for students with mental health issues or those who faced bullying in face-to-face settings. Whilst the most intriguing result was that, compared to previous research (e.g., Hassel & Ridout, 2018), many of the students welcomed the challenge of independent learning, the chance to be responsible for their own learning and the opportunity to develop work-life balance skills. However, these reflections were directly linked to how learning and support was structured at the particular university. Further to students' initial misconceptions, perceptions, and motivations for joining, it was interesting to see how the Covid-19 pandemic affected respondents in different ways – with some opting in for a distance-learning university considering it as the 'safe' and 'smart' choice.

First-year distance learning students, overall, appear to be satisfied with the resources and support in the particular distance-learning settings. This is a direct result of the wide range of available offline and online resources, and tutor support. Curiously, while students knowingly registered for distance-learning, they highlighted the importance of having the option of offline resources, too. Further, this study stresses students' challenges with assessment in distance-learning, without the 'security' of the schoolteacher who approves their readiness. Surprisingly many students welcomed this responsibility, whilst others longed for this 'security'. This finding points to the need for more guided assessment (for

instance, assessment examples and pilots) for students with lower levels of confidence. The study validates previous findings on difficulties in socialising in distance-learning settings (Krasilnikov & Smirnova, 2017), and provides some tools for improving social interactions. Furthermore, our findings extend our knowledge of social interaction in distance learning universities by revealing how age differences can intensify difficulties in socialising, but they also reveal that not all students desire the same level of interaction with their peers. It appears that some, while studying flexibly, make time for out-of-university activities and interactions.

These insights add to the literature on first-year students' transitions from school/college to university, and in particular to distance-learning. Our findings can inform pre-induction and induction programmes as well as policies, to improve students' experiences and reduce first-year drop-out rates. This work can be useful to both distance-learning universities and traditional institutions that have switched to distance-learning due to the pandemic.

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