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Reflecting on students' perspectives of a pre-entry psychology course in academic skills (2017-2021)

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Abstract

It is known that first-year retention rates are a cause for concern within higher education.
One way in which to tackle this is to consider how institutions can best prepare new
students for the transition to university. The current paper details a project from the
University of the West of Scotland where first year psychology students enrolled on a pre-
entry academic skills induction course in order to support their transition to university. The
course consisted of engagement with five interactive magazines to allow students to begin
experiencing the digital environments, skills, and resources that they would need
throughout their degree ('*What is psychology?*', '*How do I study?*', '*The importance of
critical thinking*', '*What's involved in psychological research?*' and '*Life after university*').
Focus groups were conducted with students shortly after taking part in the course, and
again four years later upon graduation, to explore its perceived value both as a new student,
and across time at university. A deductive thematic analysis showed a positive reception to

the materials, but that some topics were less relevant at the beginning of a degree course.

We reflect upon these findings in the context of current HE practice.

Key words: transitions, students, higher education, academic skills, psychology

Higher education (HE) can make an important contribution to individuals' lives, with the first academic year being highly influential in that experience (Bovill et al., 2011). Evidence has suggested the importance of students' early experiences on their subsequent performance and progression (Yorke & Longden, 2006); however, many institutions are concerned about first-year retention rates. The Office for Students (2022) reports fairly consistent continuation rates for the past six academic years for full time undergraduate students (at around 91%) but this still means a dropout of 9% each year. For part-time students, this has reached a peak dropout of 42% within the last six years. Student dropout is a major concern in both education and policy-making contexts (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Tinto, 2006). Not only do students who drop out lose the time and effort they have put in, institutions are unable to recoup the resources they devoted to those students (Aulck et al., 2017). It is argued that an important way to increase student retention is through focusing on the transition into HE in the first place (Coertjens et al., 2017).

Upon entering HE, students are required to become independent and critical in both their learning and thinking (Bovill et al., 2011; Yorke, 2000). Making such adjustments can be challenging (Marland, 2003; Nel, Troskie-de Bruin, & Bitxer, 2009), so preparing students in advance of entry can facilitate the transition and tackle issues surrounding retention (Coertjens et al., 2017). Tinto's (1993) student integration theory argues that students are more likely to continue their studies if they are connected to the social (building relationships and connections out with the classroom) and academic (becoming attached to the intellectual aspect of HE) life of the institution. This theory is therefore useful in considering what would aid the transition into HE.

The Project

In early 2017, the research team from the psychology department of the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) embarked on a project to develop materials to support the transition of first year students enrolling onto the four-year undergraduate BSc Psychology degree. UWS is one of the most successful universities in Scotland in ensuring that more people from disadvantaged backgrounds can access HE. It is committed to contributing to the Scottish Government's widening access priorities, and provides internal funding opportunities for staff to support the development of teaching/learning resources.

As such, funding was received for the development and distribution of an online pre-entry academic skills course for first year undergraduate psychology students in order to tackle issues around preparedness for the transition to university by addressing academic integration as outlined in Tinto's (1993) theory.

Course Content

The course was comprised of a series of short interactive magazines (each took around 30 minutes to complete) which covered key academic skills that students would be expected to apply upon entry to university. The magazines comprised written content as well as interactive tasks and quizzes, video clips from staff and students, and additional resources. We hoped that engaging students with these bitesize magazines would allow them to begin experiencing the digital environments, skills and resources they would need throughout their degree at UWS. Magazine content covered:

1. **What is psychology?**

   Introduced students to psychology as a discipline. Addressed myths of 'what is psychology'. Discussed how we study psychology. Discussed areas of psychology.

2. **How do I study?**

Introduced students to key study skills involving; different teaching methods, how to get the most from classes, and how to study.

3. **The importance of critical thinking**

Introduced students to critical thinking. Discussion of identifying credible sources. Identified the differences between descriptive and critical writing.

4. **What's involved in psychological research?**

Introduced students to psychological research. Covered issues such as what is involved in research, quantitative vs. qualitative methods, and ethics.

5. **Life after university**

Provided information about careers and further study. For example, different types of postgraduate degrees and specialist areas in psychology were discussed.

Materials were developed in time for the start of the 2017/2018 academic year. Students were given access to the course (the first three magazines) after enrolling on the degree programme but before they attended their first class. This was to allow students to work through the course at their own pace and to become familiar with HE terms/processes and with UWS before they started, allowing time to prepare for the transition into HE well before it took place, as suggested by Coertjens et al. (2017). We then provided time for students during the in-person induction sessions to complete the remaining magazines with two members of the research team present to answer student queries or help with concerns. The course was hosted on the university's virtual learning environment. This meant that students had access to the resource throughout the four years of their degree and could re-read or refer to the material at any point.

Student feedback

In order to determine student receptiveness to – and effectiveness of – the course, qualitative data was collected at two time points: in November 2017 (two months after first year students began at university), and in July 2021 (when the same cohort graduated). Ethical approval was requested and obtained from the home institution, and focus groups were arranged at times convenient to the researchers and participants. Calls for participation were made to the cohort within lectures and online, and anyone interested was asked to contact one of the research team. As an incentive for participation, £10 Amazon gift cards were offered upon completion of contribution.

A focus group schedule was developed to probe students' perceptions of the value of the course. At time one, 11 students (P1-11) took part in three face-to-face focus groups, and at time two, 4 students (P12-15) took part in two online focus groups via Microsoft Teams, all facilitated by one member each from the research team. The researchers purposely sought feedback from participants from the same cohort at the start and end of their university degrees – although these were not the same participants – to allow for a longitudinal consideration of the value of the course. A deductive thematic analysis – characterized by Braun and Clarke (2022) as where the researcher seeks to deliberately explore or develop analysis in relation to pre-existing ideas or frameworks (such as answering specific questions) – was applied to the data, resulting in the responses below.

Time 1: Beginning university

The focus groups at Time 1 aimed to obtain an understanding of the value of the course just as it had been completed. In addition to exploring specific feedback on each of the

magazines in terms of what was useful and what could be developed, the following more general questions and answers were asked and attained about the course as a whole:

Q1: In what ways do you feel the course was relevant to your studies?

Participants identified that some magazines were more relevant than others:

> *'This one* ['What is involved in psychological research?'] *is very relevant once you start doing the course'* (P11)

> *'All… are pretty relevant as we go through our studies and coursework'* (P6)

Participants identified specific magazines that were relevant to aspects of their modules, even at such an early stage of their degree. They also identified that other magazines, although not relevant at the current time, would be in the future:

> *'This one* ['Life after university'] *that's just in the back of your mind… it's not relevant yet'* (P8)

> *'I think it's good to have in the back of your mind'* (P9)

As such, it was generally determined that the magazines were appropriate though perhaps at different stages of their degrees, so moving forward it may be useful to focus more so on those of immediate importance at the start, and save those more applicable to the end of the degree until later.

The second question focused on the impact of the course:

Q2: What sort of impact did the course have on your experience of coming to university?

Participants identified that it was useful in terms of setting expectations:

> *'It kind of set the playing field for me as to what's gonna be expected of me, what I maybe need to start thinking about'* (P1)

> *'It's a good way just to kinda get you a taster… it sets you up and prepares you'* (P3)

Here we can see the value students placed on the course in terms of helping them prepare for what was ahead. In addition, the delivery of the course – some online, and some in person – was valued:

> *'We'd done the first few of these lessons by distance and then we came into uni as well to do the last lesson. I just found that useful as a kind of dripping process to come into uni, and it was building your confidence up along the way'* (P4)

The magazines therefore provided a kind of 'soft open' to being a student; affording them the opportunity to come into campus before term started and begin developing attributes like confidence even at an early stage. As such, the materials can be promoted as helpful for highlighting expectations of university life.

Finally, given that the course was devised on the premise that such inductions are beneficial for students (McIntyre, 2020; Robb & Moffat, 2020), we wanted to explore how we could best promote the course to encourage more engagement from students (as it was non-compulsory) through the following question:

Q3: How do you think more interest could be garnered in the course?

Responses from participants ranged from how the course was pitched, to including some elements of choice and promoting its worth:

> *'Explain what it's about rather than just calling it* 'Academic Skills' *because that's a bit vague… it covers more than just academic skills'* (P7)

> *'Let them make up their own mind whether they want to kinda look at it, but for me, I think it's really important'* (P5)

> *'If you told them… how helpful it could end up being for them'* (P3)

These quotes highlight practical ways that the course could be developed, focused upon the fundamental purpose of it and how it is presented to students not as a compulsory piece of preliminary coursework but as a resource that could be utilised throughout their degree.

In sum, from the first round of feedback, after the new cohort had completed the five magazines and were two months into their degrees, the take-away message we obtained was that further consideration needs to be given to the focus of the magazines (though on the whole they were deemed appropriate); that fundamentally the course was used to set expectations of university life, and that we must give further thought to how the course is presented to students in order to encourage engagement. Forty-four months later, the same cohort were graduating from university, and we conducted a second round of focus groups.

Time 2: Reflecting on the previous four years

The purpose of the focus groups at Time 2 was to discover, in retrospect, how useful the course had been across the entirety of participants' degrees. Although they had been encouraged to use the magazine materials across their degrees where they saw appropriate, this was not compulsory, and so now that participants were graduates, we wanted to discover the extent to which the course had been valued across the span of their degrees:

Q1: How useful was the course at the start of your degree?

> *'I thought that they were quite good, especially the ones that broke down each of the different disciplines… I remember seeing it for the first time, I didn't realise how many different types of disciplines there were in psychology'* (P14)

'I thought the research one in particular was quite good to kinda get my head around and like you know before starting it because I wasn't really expecting it to be so research heavy' (P12)

'I felt it was really good at the time just to have that bridge between going into university and actually being in university because there's a sort of a gap in between not knowing what's going on, and it can make things just that little bit more anxious for people before they actually get started' (P15)

When reflecting on the value of the course, participants picked up on similar themes as identified earlier: that materials were relevant both in terms of specific content and focus of the magazines, but also for preparation for actually beginning university. This provides further support that the content is appropriate perhaps only for that specific starting point of university, given how participants answered the following question:

Q2: To what extent did you engage with the resources after first year?

'I completely forgot about it. But then again also because that type of resources I feel like we were learning the same content in our modules… You know if it says "evaluate" you do this. If it says "critique" you do that. So on that aspect even though we didn't access the resources directly, they were given in other ways through the module contents on that aspect that I didn't feel the need to go back' (P12)

'I think I forgot about it to be to be honest, I didn't go back, but I do think it would have been good to go back… it would be good to remember it was there to go back to later' (P13)

'I didn't go back to it, but I remember doing it and thinking, 'ok, so I've got this, this is going to be OK', because it helped that transition… Although I didn't go back to it, that's not to say that it didn't have a material effect on my ability to go forward into

first year, because I really think that it did. It gives a lot of information, it builds a lot

of confidence' (P15)

The fact that participants did not engage with the materials beyond the induction period is of interest given how favourably they seem to speak of them. P15 above, for instance, suggests that the materials were specifically for the transition to university, rendering them less useful later, whereas P13 identifies that although they did not do so (as they forgot about the course), it would have been useful to return to the materials at a later stage, highlighting the conflicting uses of the course across the cohort. It is notable that the participants here all admit to forgetting about the course which highlights the importance of staff reminding students about the availability of these resources, whether students decide to return to them or not.

Finally, participants were asked to reflect, four years on, about the value of the resource for new students (as they were when they first encountered the course):

Q3: What are your thoughts on resources like these for new first years?

'They're a good foundation and good starting point for you' (P14)

'I would say to engage if you want to get to grips with what's going on, it's good to

know before you start like what's gonna happen. And also to remember it's there'

(P13)

'It is helpful to get your hands on what to expect… a sense of don't panic' (P12)

In a similar vein to feedback at time one, participants highlighted the value of the resource in terms of setting expectations and helping to provide a sense of what will be coming during time at university. The course was described as a "good starting point", useful for

"get(ting) to grips with what's going on", and providing "a sense of don't panic", which offers valuable insight into how new students feel about starting a university course.

Reflection

The feedback obtained from students revealed that they perceived the content and delivery of the course as generally positive, however there are several elements that require consideration should this course be taken forward for future cohorts.

It is important to begin this discussion by recognising that those students who took part in the focus groups were more likely to be engaged students (Schroeder & Kuh, 2003) and thus the results we highlight here may not be representative of the whole cohort; particularly for those students who dropped out of the programme before the end. Students in both focus groups expressed that the topics covered were relevant and appropriate to them as newcomers to HE. However, there was consensus that some topics (e.g., *Critical Thinking, Life After University*) were perhaps not at the forefront of their concerns so early in their academic career. Students who took part in the time 2 focus groups indicated that they began to understand the relevance of topics such as these as they progressed through their degree, but by that time had forgotten that the resource existed. This indicates that perhaps a more staggered approach to the release of each topic, with programme teams consistently reminding students that new topics are available may be a more effective method to improve engagement with the course materials. While students appreciated the more generalised '*What is Psychology?*' topics before their programme began, those targeting specific academic skills may be more appropriately placed when their first-year assignments are approaching so that they have context for the skills outlined in the magazines. Similarly, the more future-facing topics were considered not as relevant. In line

with this, Knoster and Goodboy (2020) found that when lesson content was presented to college students without clear content-relevance, students were less interested in the material, perceived the task as less valuable and were less likely to retain the information during a post-session quiz. As such, the likes of *'Life After University'* might be better presented as stand-alone material to students nearing the end of their degrees; not as they have just walked in the door.

Nonetheless, both the time 1 and time 2 focus groups highlighted that students largely shared the sentiment of the research team in terms of the primary aim of the online course: to help students feel more prepared for their transition into HE. At both stages, participants emphasised that the usefulness of the resource was grounded primarily in the magazines that focused on setting expectations in terms of what topics would be covered in their programme, what the teaching format would look like and what kind of skills they would be expected to develop and implement on arrival. One participant in the time 2 focus group reflected on the course as a bridge between "*going* to university" and "*getting* to university", while another said it provided "a sense of '*don't panic*'", indicating that pre-entry resources such as this may provide some comfort and increase feelings of preparedness during the limbo period between acceptance to university and arrival on campus. In line with student integration theory, helping students feel connected to the intellectual element of their academic institution before arrival can improve their likelihood of progressing through their programme of study (Tinto, 1993). Research also consistently demonstrates a considerable gap between what students expect from HE, and their experiences once they arrive (Forrester et al., 2005). This is argued to be even more pertinent for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who often struggle to form realistic expectations and adapt to university life due to limited prior experience or knowledge of

what it entails (Forsyth & Furlong, 2003). In line with this, Quinn and colleagues (2005) found that such students who withdraw from their studies do so because of "academic culture shock" as a result of assuming the university learning experience would mimic that of secondary school or college. Given that the initial topics covered in this pre-entry course were centred around 'what to expect', its potential to minimise this "shock" to the students' systems could be invaluable in setting students on the path for success.

This is more crucial now than ever, given that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a direct impact on the route from acceptance to attendance. While, as noted earlier, the number of students exiting university within the first 12 months of study marginally decreased in the context of the pandemic (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2022), this may in-part be explained by the number of students who accepted offers, but then chose to defer study, which rose by 15% to 24,855 in 2021 (UCAS, 2021). The uncertainty around what their course would look like in the context of COVID-19 and remote learning is thought to be a major contributor to deferral decisions, highlighting that the importance of providing pre-entry students with insight into what they can expect when their course begins is ever more critical as we emerge from the pandemic and adjust to a 'new normal' approach to HE delivery.

As many universities are embedding more hybrid teaching models, where much content remains delivered online, it is important to consider the impact this will undoubtably have on students transitioning to HE for the first time. Yorke (2004) suggests that the need for connection and personal engagement between staff and students in the very early stages is especially paramount to developing an active psychological contract in a distance learning context, and there is agreement that engagement by both students and teaching staff in early induction activities help contribute to a "state of preparedness" and

long-term retention (Forrester et al., 2005; Nichols, 2010, p94). Through using and adapting pre-entry preparedness courses such as the one outlined here, university staff can begin to interact and form a sense of community with their students before their programme begins. While the current course did include talking head videos from current staff members, allowing students to become familiar with the faces they would soon see in classes, more real-time interaction (e.g., through pre-entry online forums or groups) could facilitate a sense of student integration even further. Similarly, it would be beneficial to include a social integration element (Tinto, 1993) in future versions of this course, providing new students with an online platform to introduce themselves and begin forming relationships and connections with their cohort may contribute even more to fostering a strong sense of community prior to arrival at university. Finally, it is also essential to further consider the accessibility issues many students face engaging with such online materials, for various reasons.

Overall, while a relatively modest evaluation of a pre-entry academic skills course designed for psychology undergraduate students, the focus groups relayed here have provided important points for reflection in terms of how student-focused initiatives such as these are actually received by the students they are created for. Pre-entry resources and activities clearly have an important role to play in setting student expectations of university life and learning, and helping students feel less daunted about the transition ahead. However, more work is needed to determine whether a more stage-relevant delivery approach could improve their longer-term usefulness. While our evaluation calls into question the utility of such resources past the induction phase, providing such a transitional tool in those crucial early stages can have a lasting effect on students' readiness for

university, reducing "academic culture shock" and thereby setting them on a more positive pathway for progression.

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