

Nurture through Transition

Abstract

Transition to University life is widely recognised as a challenging time for students. With the aim of developing targeted and effective support, the Nurture through Transition project looks at the academic skills that current students feel are most valuable as an offer holding and transition student at The University of Manchester. The reflections of current students were captured in short semi-structured interviews conducted by a group of their peers. The data collected will be used as an evidence base to inform practices within the Library and across The University of Manchester to advise further initiatives and interventions to support offer holding students through transition.

Data captured indicates that students are confident in areas such as exam technique but less confident with referencing, critical reading and time management. Furthermore initial findings indicate that regardless of feeling anxious or excited about the prospect, all students take time to adjust and adapt to the academic expectations of higher education.

A further output of this project is a learner centred resource that captures the reflections of current University of Manchester students who outline some of the challenges that they faced and how they overcame those challenges using the support and the guidance that the University provides. As a central method of outreach it is anticipated that the resource can contribute to the success of future students at Manchester, extending the welcome of the organisation as a whole. If widely adopted, this would be the first University wide deployment of such an intervention and its uptake and impact will sustain further research into this area. The resource is available here https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/other-resources/transition-to-university/story_html5.html

Introduction

There is an extensive body of research exploring the experience of students from offer to first year. Much of the literature explores how students experience a range of feelings and experiences during transition that affects their economic, social and personal identity. The research indicates the need for students to have support throughout this time (Harvey and Drew, 2006). However, The University of Manchester currently has no centrally coordinated support which specifically targets its offer holding students. (Aston, 2015) This project aims to make initial explorations into the academic skills used by students entering The University of Manchester in order to begin to put in place one such resource. The project also intends to deliver an intervention to offer an introduction to support available.

This project addresses concerns around recruitment, retention and success. Students are most likely to drop out within their first year in HE (Yorke and Longden, 2007).

We examined how students describe their feelings about their academic skills when they commenced their study at Manchester and began to establish a framework for providing peer to peer support for offer holding students. The overarching aims of this project were to find out how

confident our students felt about their academic skills on arrival at University and to begin to identify the challenges that they face as they enter higher education. To do this we set the following objectives:

- To get a snapshot view of students' academic skills challenges
- To use this data to inform the development of a pre-arrival online resource
- To create an evidence base for further work on pre-arrival initiatives

Manchester is committed to providing an outstanding learning and student experience, offering students opportunities to acquire the core skills. The outcomes of this project meet the aims of CHERIL by providing the University with evidence based recommendations on how it can improve the learning experience for those students through their transition to university, as well as providing guidance to students in an innovative and engaging manner. Continued evaluation of this resource by students will provide the University with valuable data that could inform future developments in support during what is recognised as a difficult time.

Methodology

Prior to commencing this study a short investigation was conducted to explore the local environment of support for transition students at The University of Manchester. Through consultation with central services including Communications and Marketing and Student Recruitment and the Schools of Nursing and the Social Sciences, we were able to sketch out the current support available. This review emphasised the need for this project to aid in developing a consistent and democratic offer of support for our students. (Aston, 2015)

The Library Student Team is composed of currently registered students who work for the Library on a casual basis; they represent the voice of the student population and contribute to a variety of Library projects. This placed them in an ideal position to be involved in the CHERIL project. A small number of the team received a project briefing which introduced them to the aims of the project and more general ethics around research and data. The training also included work around interviewing skills, as we hoped to mitigate the possibility that students would hesitate to be honest with their peers. Working together, we took the decision early in the project that the original plan of focus groups would present a significant challenge for recruitment and possibly narrow the field of participants. We felt that taking a semi-structured interview approach would provide us with higher quality and more relevant data and enable us to explore the aforementioned questions. Semi-structured interviews were selected to encourage more in depth conversations with the participants. With the Student Team acting as interviewers for the project, we used their experience speaking to students to give the participants ample space to respond.

At the start of the study, the Student Team played a significant role in the development of the questions for the interviews by conducting a thorough pilot of the interview questions. They piloted the questions in over forty interviews, refining the questions to ensure that they aligned with the project goals. All the interview data was collected in Qualtrics survey software. The final interview questions (Appendix 1) centred upon:

- students expectations of HE study before they arrived at Manchester
- whether and how these expectations differed from their actual experience

Participants for the study were selected at random from students present in the Alan Gilbert Learning Commons (AGLC) and represent a slice of undergraduate students from all years of study, as transition and academic skills development are issues regardless of subject discipline. The AGLC is a hub for undergraduate students across disciplines. The random nature of the sample allowed the research to explore the space of transition without ascribing behaviours to a specific discipline area or stage of study.

Ethical approval was granted to carry out the study in December 2015, and the data collection commenced in February – March 2016. Initial analysis was carried out within the data collection software, with further analysis using a grounded theory approach with the qualitative data.

To meet the objective of creating an online resource for offer holding students we invited participants to return to be videoed and feature in the resource. In addition, we called upon two members of our Student Team who had not been involved to participate in this aspect of the project. The resource aimed to capture their stories relating to their academic challenges and focus upon the following:

- what their challenges were in making the transition to studying at University level
- if and how they overcame these challenges

Initial Findings

The data collected from the interviews allowed us to draw some initial conclusions about students' experience of independent learning and academic skills in higher education:

Students demonstrate both positive and negative thoughts about the prospect of independent learning at university. 57% of the respondents used positive such as *self-motivated*, *freedom*, *control* and *independence* to describe their thoughts about learning and 43% indicated more negative thoughts, using terms like *daunting*, *overwhelming*, *scared* and *frightening*. (Table 1)

Table 1	No. of students	%
Positive	51	57
Negative	39	43

Students struggle more with specific academic skills during transition. Figure 1 (below) shows the responses to Question 3. (Appendix 1) The majority of respondents indicated “not at all” confident status in referencing as an academic skill upon arrival at the University, as illustrated by the purple line.

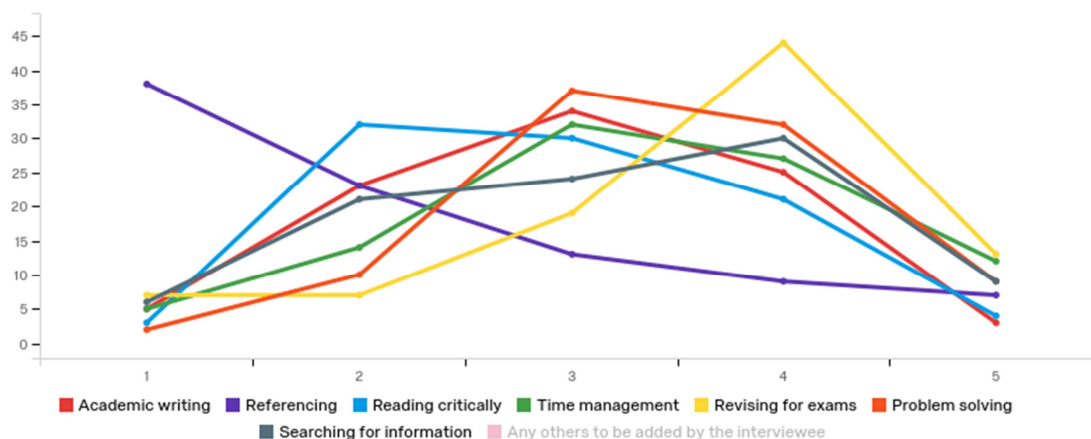


Fig. 1. Graph to show how many students felt confident about individual skills upon commencing university. (Y axis is the number of students, X axis 1 = not at all confident, 5 is confident)

Students emphasised the necessity for developing their skill in referencing and talked about it as follows:

'Referencing was the most important. Articulating in your own words without copying' (Subject 33)

'Have to reference. Academic writing is very strict here. At college it was coursework based but not as strict. Referencing was a huge difference, very daunting' (Subject 63)

'Amount of independent work and research required and referencing pressure to form your own ideas rather than regurgitate whatever is given to you' (Subject 17)

In addition, referencing was highlighted as an essential skill that was not taught before arrival at university in the video footage for the resource.

'One of the most important skills, I would say is referencing' (Student in 'transition to University resource')

Alongside referencing, participants also identified reading critically as an academic skill that, similar to referencing, was a skill they needed to rapidly develop upon entering university.

'Knowing how to effectively get the crux of a topic out of a book or article' (Subject 81)

'Being able to pick out key information from reading quickly' (Subject 62)

'Critical reading you don't do it in college' (Subject 84)

'Reading critically instead of memorising' (Subject 54)

'Level of reading and be more critical here you feel less spoon fed this is how they can better prepare us for the work place' (Subject 26)

Finally, time management weaves through many of the subjects responses as can be seen below.

'Critical thinking and time management because of the lack of structured studying in university' (Subject 58)

'Time management and self-discipline. This because you have to structure your time to match your workload' (Subject 6)

'Time management because I procrastinated till the last week. I got a good score, but it was stressful' (Subject 78)

'Time management to juggle several pieces of work and presentations at the same time' (Subject 71)

'A bit weird from going to school 5 days a week found it strange the more free time especially after dead lines' (Subject 26)

Students see time management as a skill that is essential for them to enable them to organise their learning workload, yet this, along with referencing and reading critically, is something that they are not prepared for. This data highlights the fact that students are, in fact, trying to simultaneously learn new facts or concepts and how best to learn and organise themselves at University. A focused resource, one that introduced students to the concepts of referencing, reading critically and time management, could enable them to better orient themselves during the intent transitional time.

Students potentially need a semester to develop their confidence in understanding referencing. The graph in Fig 2. indicates how the first years in the sample (48%) reflected on their academic skills confidence before they began at Manchester. This graph indicates that referencing was the skill that the students felt the least confidence in. Fig.3. indicates how confident they felt about these skills when the data was actually collected in March, (Semester 2) and demonstrates that students' confidence in referencing has dramatically changed during semester 1.

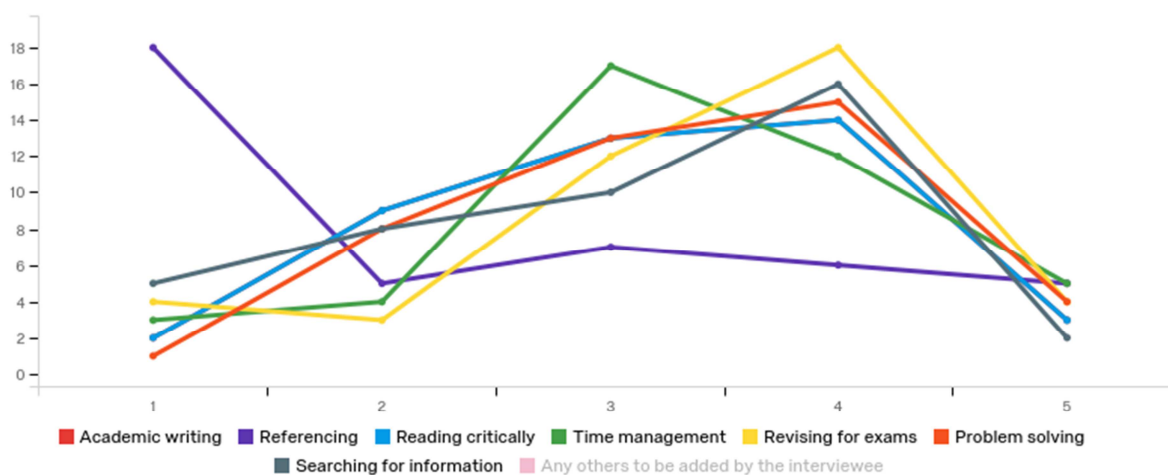


Figure 2 Responses to Q.3 for first year students

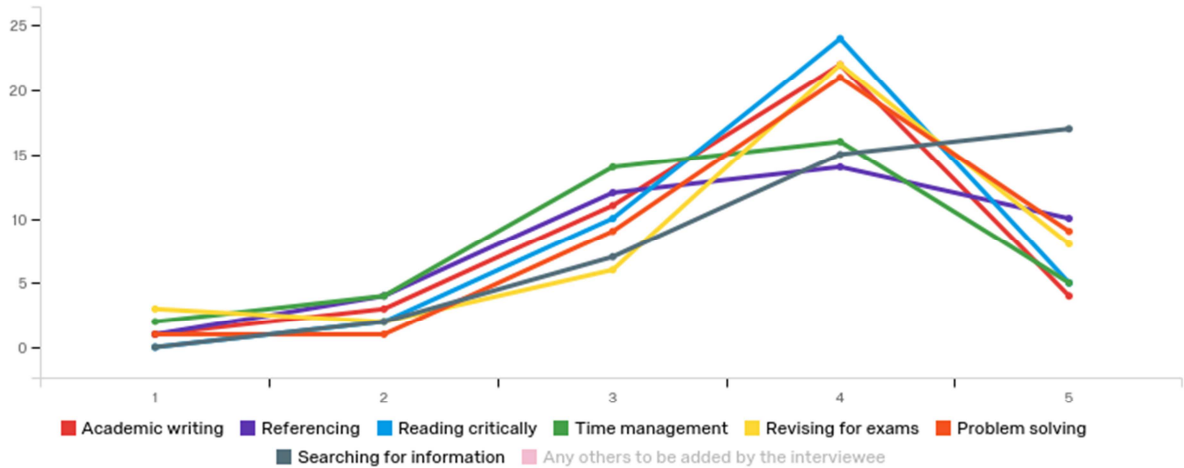


Figure 3 Responses to Q.9 for first year students

Figures 2 & 3 above indicate a positive movement in confidence in the named academic skills, when compared with the experience of the students before their arrival. Students are gaining confidence in these skills over time.

In addition, many participants indicated they sought support for their academic skills from a range of support staff at the University as can be seen in Fig. 4 below. The word cloud indicates the responses to question with the most frequent responses being the largest and clearest in the cloud.

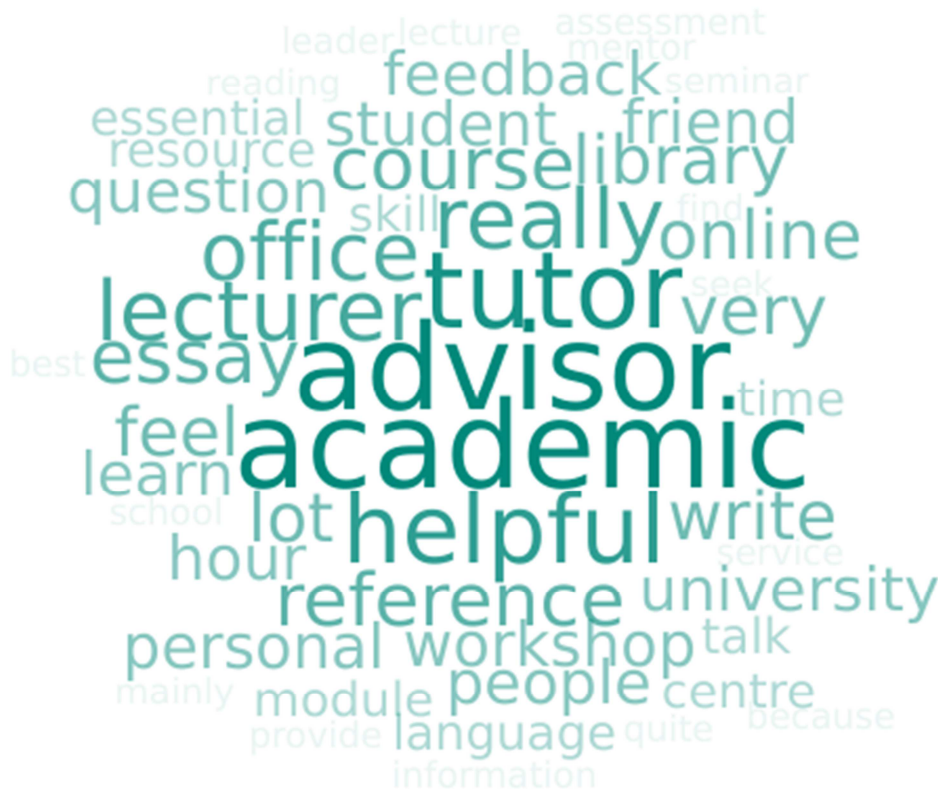


Figure 4. Responses to Q.10 Did you seek any help to assist you improve your academic skills?

Conclusion

What are the implications of this snapshot view of academic skills for students in transition and who is it useful for? It was apparent from the interviews that students were less sure about what they should do to up-skill and prepare before they arrived at university. This would suggest that the University has to make the effort to ensure that it is helping to highlight to students the skills that they need upon arrival.

This leads to an opportunity for first year, semester 1, programmes to develop approaches to learning and assessment that allow for students to develop confidence in the skills which have been identified in this project. Incorporating explicit guidance in referencing, reading critically and time management for year 1 students will acknowledge that students need support in these areas before they are assessed on a skill that they have no experience of. Critically, this can be done without having to create entirely new resource, as it is here that the support of the Library can be drawn on.

The University of Manchester Library, as the provider of My Learning Essentials, is best placed to ensure that skills development plays a fundamental role in supporting students as they transition into becoming a part of the University. Programme leads can work with the Library's MLE Team to deploy the appropriate guidance and support to meet the needs of our transitioning students.

This brings us to the resource that we have created. This will be disseminated to students from central teams, Student Recruitment, Central Marketing and Communications. As an intervention the resource provides candid advice from peers to support those students feeling overwhelmed and daunted and provides guidance to students who ready to make that step to independence. (see screenshots below)



Retrospective

This project grew from a desire to gain a better understanding of students' concerns about academic skills and academic preparedness prior to arriving at university. The project further intended to develop an online resource to provide offer holding students with an insight into what awaits them from their peers.

The Student Team, particularly Farida Abbasova and Sarah Balid, contributed hugely to the success of the project. The involvement of the Student Team on this project was vital, and if I was to carry out a future project, I would have students play an even greater role in the project from initiation to completion. Inclusion of our students in the research that we do meets the Learning Through

Research agenda, and students provide an insider 'expertness' to projects that focus upon student activity and support.

If I had to do this project again, I would have been less ambitious with what could be achieved within the project timescale. I would have been more focused on what is critical vs what is nice to have. This might be something that the board might consider asking to support future applications. The project budget was appropriate (Appendix 2).

Building on this project going forward, a different methodology could be applied, perhaps taking a user experience approach by recruiting a small number of students before they arrive at Manchester and recording their journey from school/college into University and through their first semester. Additional interviews could be done across campus, to combat the possibility that there was some issue with basing the project in the AGLC. This would address the reliability of the reflections of participants in this study and capture their experiences in real time.

The resource that has been created as part of this project to provide transition students with initial access to peer support before arrival at university offers two benefits. The first is the resource will provide students with an insight on how learning at university is different in higher education. Offer holding students can access the resource and enlist the support of the resources that it links to, such as My Learning Essentials and the University of Manchester Aspiring Students Society. The second benefit is that the resource provides an evidence base for organisational approaches for this audience alongside other initiatives. Engagement with the resource is being tracked and further data will be collected to better understand what further steps the University could take to improve the student experience for pre-arrival students and those students transitioning into their first year at university.

References

Aston, S. (2015). Nurture through Transition. Pre-project report: unpublished.

Harvey, L. and Drew, S. (2006). *The first-year experience: Briefing paper, overview for researchers*. London: The Higher Education Academy.

Yorke, M. and Longden, B. (2007). *The first-year experience in higher education in the UK: Final Report*, York: The Higher Education Academy.

Appendix 1

Nurture through Transition – This will guide the conversation and notes will be made by the interviewer. There is no expectation that the participants will see this interview.

Q1 What year of undergraduate study are you in?

- Year 1 (1)
- Year 2 (2)
- Year 3 (3)
- Year 4 (4)
- Year 5 (5)

Q2 Student ID number

Prompt: Define academic skills: learning experiences, study attitudes, study skills, study techniques to student. Ensure that they have the same understanding or not. Includes things like writing skills, referencing, avoiding plagiarism, note-taking, time management, etc.

Q3 Thinking back to the time before you started university, how did you feel about academic skills? 1: Not at all confident 5: Very confident (Likert scale)

Academic writing, Referencing, Reading Critically, Time management, Revising for exams, Problem solving, Searching for information, Any others to be added

Q4 How did you feel about having less structure and being responsible for your own work during your first year?

Q5 What skills make university work different to what you did at college/6th form or school and why do you think that is?

Q6 For first years: When you were given your first piece of work to complete what was the most useful skill that would have enabled you to do your work more efficiently? For second years and above: Think back to when you had to do your first year assignments.

Q7 If you could go back in time what would you do differently to prepare yourself to take more responsibility for and be successful in your academics studies at university?

Q8 How could the university support your academic development before you arrive?

Q9 How do you currently feel about academic skills today? 1: Not at all confident 5: Very confident (Likert scale)

Academic writing, Referencing, Reading Critically, Time management, Revising for exams, Problem solving, Searching for information, Any others to be added

Q10 Did you seek any help to assist you improve your academic skills?

- a) if so what?
- b) where did you find that help?
- c) did you consider the method to be successful?

Q11 Would you be willing to come back to be recorded talking about your experiences for use in a resource to inform offer holders for 2016 entry?

- Yes (1)

○ No (2)

APPENDIX 2	Budget	Actual	Difference
Library staff time 45 days grade 5 = £6,231 10 days grade 6 = £1,731	£7,962	£7,962	£0
Student time 6 days x 15 students at grade 2	£6,924	£6,924	£0
Outsourced technical development	£3,000	£1,260	£1,740
Media services	£1,650	£ 415	£1,235
Peer Support		£ 94	£-94
Gift Vouchers		£ 150	£-150
Total	£19,536	£16,805	£2,731*