CHERIL FINAL REPORT

Transitioning to university as a nursing student

Steven Pryjmachuk, Bernie Hannity, Janet Ellis, Jane Griffiths *with* Caitlin McWilliams

20 February 2018

How has your project contributed to the strategic goals of the University and of CHERIL?
Student transition is one aspect of the overall student experience so enhancing the transition experience should impact the overall student experience (*Manchester 2020* KPI 6: Student Experience), particularly for 'non-traditional' students – mature students, those from lower socioeconomic groups, live-at-home students, etc. (KPI 8: Widening Participation; KPI 9 Social Responsibility). The project also meets CHERIL's aims of supporting original, rigorous educational research and encouraging enquiry into learning and teaching in HE.

Outline the robustness of your evaluation approach and what can be learnt from your project.
There are contained within the methods, strengths and limitations, discussion and conclusion sections of the draft paper (see Appendix).

Outline the innovative aspects of your research, and explain how it might trigger pedagogic change.
The project demonstrates that student reflections can be a rich source of research data. The demographics of nursing students (many of whom are 'non-traditional' entrants) provided a unique opportunity to study a diverse student group. Our findings and recommendations (see Appendix) suggest that changes to processes in university nursing departments can lead to beneficial changes in the transition experience, changes that may also be applicable to other disciplines.

Outline your project dissemination plan to ensure its outcomes are capable of making the greatest possible impact.
A draft paper is attached as an Appendix. We are looking to submit the results of the project to a relevant, high impact, academic journal such as *Nurse Education Today* or the *Journal of Higher Education*. We have submitted an abstract based on our draft paper to the HEA's *Networking for Education in Healthcare* (NET) conference due to be held in September this year.

How well you were able to keep to budget? What is the sustainability plan for the project?
The project is within budget. An intern (an excellent UoM psychology undergraduate on placement in the Division) was paid a fee agreed in our application to conduct the bulk of the data analysis. Since her contribution was significant, she has been added as a co-author of the paper. Regarding sustainability, we hope to encourage (via dissemination) colleagues with an interest in transitions to conduct additional research. Practically, very few of the recommendations for improving the transition experience of nursing (and other) students have significant cost implications.

If you were to undertake this project again, what would you do differently?
The hardest aspect concerned the ethics of using data (the student reflections) not specifically collected for research purposes. We had 'implied' consent (a tick box) from the students whose reflections we used but UREC guidance received was ambiguous. UREC did give us permission to use the data in a completely anonymised form. If doing similar research, we would obtain consent more formally, prior to data collection – this would also allow the collection of additional useful data (e.g. student demographics) that we were unable to collect in the current project.

APPENDIX: DRAFT PAPER FOR SUBMISSION TO AN ACADEMIC JOURNAL

Note: will need some editing prior to submission to a journal because of current word length

---

TRANSITIONING TO UNIVERSITY AS A NURSING STUDENT

Steven Pryjmachuk, Caitlin McWilliams, Bernie Hannity, Janet Ellis, Jane Griffiths

Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health, The University of Manchester

Abstract

Background

The international literature has largely conceptualised the transition from school or college to university-level study as a process of adjustment to both the social and the academic demands of university life. Several interrelated factors influence this process, notably the expectations of students, academic staff and parents, a sense of 'fitting in' or belongingness, and the degree to which students are prepared for university-level study. The literature also points to number of student groups – most of which are well represented in the nursing student population – who might have particular difficulty in making a successful transition to university life such as 'first-in-family' students, mature students, black and minority ethnic students, live-at-home students, LGBT students and disabled students.

Study aims

To explore first year nursing students' experiences of the transition to university in order to compare nursing students' experiences with those of other disciplines and identify ways of easing the transition for nursing students.

Methodology

As part of an online study skills module, first year nursing students at an English University submitted a 500-word, formative reflection on the transition from school, college or work to university. 161 students allowed their reflections to be used in this research. These reflections were anonymised, the anonymised dataset subsequently being subjected to thematic content analysis. Data saturation was reached after reading approximately 50 of the 161 reflections (circa 25,000 words of data).

Key findings and conclusions

Two main themes emerged from the data: 'managing expectations' and 'practical tools and support aids'. The former is an overarching theme, permeating most of the students' reflections while the latter concerns practical, concrete actions that either the university did, or the students developed themselves, to ease the transition. Both themes embraced inter-related academic, social and personal domains. While the findings are consistent with the extant literature on transitions, considerations of personal factors are rarer in the literature than academic or social factors. Nursing students' transition experiences differ little from other students but the demographics of nursing student cohorts means that transition experiences may be more diverse. Nursing departments should focus on students' strengths, tapping into student resourcefulness to enhance transition. For transition to be eased, nursing departments need to understand that transition is a process rather than one-off event, which involves a joint enterprise between students and university staff, especially in terms of expectations and the support provided, and which cuts across academic, social and personal dimensions.

400 words

Three key points

- Given the particular diversity of the nursing student population, this study outlines the importance of universities considering transition as part of the student experience
- Asking students about their first year experiences can help universities plan and improve their induction and engagement activities
- Induction and engagement activities need to flexible so that they can be tailored to the specific needs of individual students: some require greater academic support, some greater social support and some greater support for personal development

Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK), like much of the developed world, has seen significant growth in participation in higher education (HE) in recent years, growth that has brought with it increased scrutiny of the processes and outcomes of university-level study. Given that university can be expensive, much of this scrutiny has, unsurprisingly, come from those funding HE – mostly governments and the students themselves – where the focus has tended to be on student satisfaction and value-for-money (see, for example, Neves & Wilson 2017). The student experience, however, encompasses much more than satisfaction and finances and there has been increasing academic interest in scrutinising the more personal and developmental aspects of going to university. This interest covers the whole student journey: from thinking about, transitioning to, attending and graduating from university to subsequent employment and career development. It also encompasses those who do not complete the student journey, i.e. those who drop out from their studies.

Nursing has been fully integrated into the UK HE sector for almost 30 years and during this time it has made a significant contribution to the growth in participation, particularly from female and 'non-traditional' entrants. Nursing degrees have tended to attract significant proportions of mature students (Universities UK 2014), typically 25% of students studying subjects allied to medicine (the largest of which is nursing) live at home (HEFCE 2009), and more than 20% of nursing students come from low participation neighbourhoods (Health Education England 2014). All of these are student groups who tend to struggle with university life. This, coupled with the Nursing and Midwifery Council's requirements that nursing students undergo work-like clinical placements and an extended academic year, means that nursing students are a unique group in which to explore the transition from school or college (or indeed work) to university.

Literature review

The international literature on general university students has largely conceptualised the transition from school or college to university-level study as a process of adjustment to both the social and the academic demands of university life (Tinto 1993; Heublein 2004). A number of interrelated factors influence this process, notably: the **expectations** of students, academic staff and parents (Smith 2004; Yorke & Longden 2008; Palmer et al 2009; James et al 2010; Briggs et al 2012; Heublein 2014; McEwan 2015; Neves & Hillman 2017); a sense of 'fitting in' or **belongingness** (Harvey et al 2006; Palmer et al 2009; HEPI/Unite Students 2017); and the degree to which students are

prepared for university-level study (Harvey et al 2006; James et al 2010; Briggs et al 2012; HEPI/Unite Students 2017).

The general literature also points to certain student groups – many of which are well-represented in the nursing student population – that might have particular difficulty in transitioning successfully. These include 'first-in-family' students (often from low socioeconomic groups or low participation neighbourhoods), mature students, black and minority ethnic students, live-at-home or 'commuter' students, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) students and disabled students (Richardson 1995; Harvey et al 2006; Yorke & Longden 2008; Briggs et al 2012; HEPI/Unite Students 2017).

Expectations can be over- or under-estimated and they can pertain to the social as well as academic demands of university life. For example, the large literature review conducted by Harvey et al (2006) found that first-year students tended to overrate their academic knowledge and abilities. More recently, the UK Student Academic Experience Survey (Neves & Hillman 2017) found matched expectations for only 9% of students, with 25% saying their experiences at university were better than expected and 13% saying they were worse. Socially, Palmer et al (2009) report that students learn the 'rites of passage into studenthood' long before they enter university via stereotypical images of university life (drinking, parties, staying in bed in the morning and so on) and these images temper their expectations and may also influence the extent to which students feel they fit in or belong.

Belongingness can refer to the extent the student fits in with the institution itself or more widely with how the student fits in with their peers. Regarding the former, Harvey et al (2006) argue that students fit in more quickly if they understand and learn the institution's rules, processes and 'discourse'. These tend to be dealt with during induction but a criticism is that induction is too often a one-off rather than a gradual or phased process (Harvey et al 2006; Briggs et al 2012). Regarding fitting in with peers, certain student groups have more difficulties than others: first-in-family students may have less peer support to draw on and mature students are more likely to be socially isolated and have financial and family concerns (Harvey et al 2006); live-at-home students tend to find making friends more difficult (Yorke & Longden 2008) since they lack the social opportunities that campus-based students have (HEPI/Unite Students 2017); and LGBT students and students from lower socioeconomic groups feel less prepared when it comes to making friends (HEPI/Unite Students 2017).

Preparedness is integrally linked to student satisfaction (Harvey et al 2006). While often interpreted as preparing students for academic study via study or learning skills development, preparedness also incorporates informed choices (including about the institution or degree), realistic expectations and motivation. It may also include raising aspirations for those for who would not normally consider university (Briggs et al 2012).

For nursing students specifically, the literature available is largely consistent with the general literature in that **social and academic integration** are common themes (Thalluri & King 2009; Taylor 2012; Ooms et al 2012), as are **expectations** (O'Brien 2007; Andrew et al 2009; Thalluri & King 2009), **preparedness** (O'Brien 2007; Taylor 2012; Birks et al 2013; Gale et al 2015) and **belongingness**. For nursing students, however, belongingness encompasses not only a sense of belonging to the university and the course but also to the profession and to clinical areas (Levett-Jones et al 2007; Andrew et al 2009; Andrew et al 2011; Fergy et al 2011; Taylor 2012).

One additional aspect that crops up in the nursing literature is the **balance between home, work and study** (Birks et al 2013; Gale et al 2015). Regular clinical placements means that nursing students not only have to adjust to the academic and social demands of university life but also the demands of the workplace because, though primarily learning experiences, clinical placements have many of the features of paid work. Moreover, given the many mature and female students studying nursing, childcare and family demands tend to affect nursing students much more than others (Pryjmachuk & Richards 2007).

Study aim

To explore first year nursing students' experiences of the transition to university, in order to compare nursing students' experiences with those of other disciplines and identify ways of easing the transition for this population group.

Methods

Sample and procedure

As part of online study skills module, first year nursing students at a UK university submitted a 500-word, formative reflection on the transition from school, college or work to university. At the

time of submission (some 8-12 weeks into the course) most had not yet had a formal clinical placement. 161 out of 433 students indicated (via an online checkbox) they were happy for their reflection to be used in research exploring transitions. The 161 reflections were downloaded from the virtual learning environment used for the online course. Since the university's ethical review committee permitted us to use only a completely anonymised dataset, we removed all identifying data from the download, entering only the text of each reflection into the qualitative research software *NVivo* before securely deleting the original download.

Although the data were anonymised, students often volunteered descriptive characteristics about themselves in their reflections, e.g. explaining what qualifications or job they had or the type of school or college they went to before coming into nursing, or stating they were a mature student or from a particular ethnicity.

Data analysis

The reflections were entered into *NVivo* to facilitate qualitative data analysis. Initially the transcripts were read and re-read by CM and JG to gain an overall impression of the data. The data were then coded, and thematic content analysis conducted (Corbin & Strauss 2008). CM and JG independently analysed the data, compared analyses and agreed upon interpretations. Negative cases and rival explanations were explored and discussed by the wider research team. During the familiarisation stage, it became apparent that data saturation would be reached after reading approximately 50 reflections (circa 25,000 words of data). Consequently, we limited analysis to a sample of 50 of the 161 reflections though 8 of the 50 were purposively sampled because of their potential to show particularly unique insights to transitions. These included five accounts from students who stated they had entered with a vocational health and social care award and three accounts from students describing a predominately negative first semester experience.

Cohort checking

An anonymised dataset meant we were unable to check the credibility of our findings with our actual participants. We thus adopted an amended version of member checking (Lincoln & Guba 1985) whereby we invited several students from the original first-year cohort (who were now in their third year), regardless of whether they provided a reflection for the study or not, to attend a

'cohort checking' focus group. In this focus group, we presented our results and asked the students to validate (or not, as the case may be) our initial findings.

Results

Sample demographics

Despite having no formal demographic information, the reflections provided some insights into the demographics of our sample. The majority (n=30) indicated they had come straight to university from school or college implying most were 'traditional' students. Eighteen students self-identified as mature students; of these, eight had completed a previous degree (most commonly in psychology) and one had a postgraduate research degree. Seven had undertaken an Access to Higher Education course prior to starting their nursing degree. Twenty-two participants stated that they had moved away from home to start their nursing degree, 16 suggested they were still living at home with the remainder's living status unknown. Typically, it was traditional students (students straight from college) who tended to move away from home, whereas mature students tended to remain at home.

The nursing specialty (field) being pursued was harder to discern; five students reported that they were studying Mental Health Nursing, one specified Children's Nursing and 14 could reasonably be assumed to be studying Adult Nursing. The remainder did not volunteer a speciality.

Thematic analysis

Two principal themes emerged from the data: **managing expectations** and **practical tools and support aids**. The former was an overarching theme, permeating most of the students' reflections while the latter concerned practical, concrete actions that either the university did, or the students developed themselves, to ease the transition.

1. Managing expectations

While the students shared many of the same experiences (e.g. living independently, balancing a heavy workload, learning how to write academically), their reaction to these experiences and how they dealt with and perceived them was very much affected by prior experience and expectations.

Expectations determined how students experienced their transitions in three domains: their academic experiences, support networks and personal development. Each of these domains is discussed below as a sub-theme.

1.1. Academic experiences

Academically, many of the students found the first semester very challenging, which left some students questioning their capability. For most, this was not about having the attributes to become a nurse, but rather the higher level academic abilities deemed necessary for the scientific aspects of nursing:

> '… my knowledge of anatomy and physiology is not as in depth as those who have a biology A level which makes it difficult for me to understand the science side of the course.'

When writing their reflections (some 8-12 weeks into the course), the students often acknowledged that the level and standard of work was challenging, yet few felt they lacked the capability to complete the course. This suggests that the academic worries they had prior to commencing the course were expectations which generally became unfounded, the anxieties resting more on the uncertainty of not knowing how challenging the course would be rather than its actual academic demands. Students who were more confident about their capability were more likely to have transferred prior knowledge to their university experience. As these two students remarked:

> 'I consider myself particularly fortunate in that I know a wealth of people who have already completed a [nursing] degree, some of whom graduated from [study site] university. Because of this I was able to gather advice on the course and course content, and to an extent prepare myself for the course.'

> 'I find that I already have some knowledge in the microbiology lectures, in the areas of infection control and prevention, this is due to the [pre-course] placement experience I have in hospitals where I had to follow these procedures to keep myself and the patient safe.'

For others, having to adjust to a higher level of work than they had anticipated was difficult:

'It has definitely been one of the most overwhelming periods of my life. Adjusting to the university environment and the new learning techniques has not been easy.'

One important issue that emerged – especially from those who had already completed a degree – was how nursing differed to other university courses. These students spoke of the overall direction or focus of the course, noting that nursing is a vocational course with a clear professional path. This meant that students talked about the transition to their career too, and how having this goal could make their transition easier:

'I applied for adult nursing because I have had time to think about the career I would like to spend my life pursuing, and because of this I feel I will be more focussed and disciplined than in my first university experience – I am working towards an end goal that I can visualise and strive towards.'

There were instances where students mentioned how the skills they were learning now would be applicable when they were qualified as nurses. The second-time degree students talked about how the course was much more structured than other degrees and their timetables were fuller. While some students said that they were not prepared for the intensity of a professional healthcare course, others appreciated the wider range of teaching approaches:

'Learning on my last degree was mostly lecture based, and I have found that the seminars, peer-assisted study group meetings and contacts with my academic advisor have much improved my experience and progression on [this] course.'

1.2. Support networks

A good support network played a large part in assisting student transition. Many students expected to feel alone or unsupported when they started university or feared homesickness or missing support systems from home, fears that were largely unsubstantiated: 'the inevitable homesickness that I expected to experience never manifested itself'.

This expectation was present in both traditional and mature students, although traditional students seemed to worry more about not finding friends in halls of residence while mature students worried more about not finding course friends. Most of the students spoke positively about making friends,

particularly the benefits of meeting a diverse range of people on their course or in their accommodation. Students said that they enjoyed learning about different cultures, interacting with people they would not normally have had the chance to interact with before university and the resulting exchange of ideas that occurred. One student stated that they were 'thankful for the privilege to sit among my inspiring fellow classmates each day', while another detailed:

> 'I have been surrounded by more cultures in my few months here than I have been in my entire life. The diversity of backgrounds here has enriched my general knowledge, tasting new cuisines and learning about different festivals and religions. I have also found that the diversity of people has influenced my self-belief; because everybody is so different, I feel that I can be more confident in myself and can try new things.'

Many students reported finding their peers a supportive presence both in terms of helping with course content and forming friendships, with students placing great emphasis on the positive, transition-enhancing effect that friendships can have:

> 'I have made new friends that help and understand the struggles of the nursing course. They have helped me and encouraged me when I have needed it.'

This was true of both traditional students and those that had spent years out of education, though mature students reported that it took them longer to find friends with similar circumstances as them, and that it was a source of anxiety before friendships were formed:

> 'Once I had begun welcome week I could see friendships forming between everyone which only added to my anxiety due to myself not meeting anyone. This began to make me feel out of place as I noticed a lot of the students were living in halls of residence which would develop their friendships further, but myself, I could not have the opportunity to live in halls because I have a house and my own family that I was going home to every night. Once welcome week was over I still had not met anyone with the same life circumstances as myself, until I randomly bumped into two girls which I found out both of them had families and had a similar background to myself. I felt the anxiety wash off me … and began to feel a lot more at ease.'

Some students were able to gauge that difficulty in forming friendships was a normal part of the transition to university and were thus able to deal better with the uncertainty:

> '[making friends] worried me a lot to begin with but knowing that I wasn't the only individual in this position enabled me to overcome this worry.'

Regarding the academic support provided by university staff, students' perceptions of the support received was linked to where they transitioned from. Previous degree students recognised that the level of academic support on their current course was far higher than that on other courses. One student noted that 'the lecturers, seminar leads and my academic advisor seem more approachable and caring than in my previous degree' whilst another stated that there was 'much more direct student support'. On the other hand, those students who had just come from school or college consistently compared support from their college tutors with that from university staff. Many commented that they were 'spoon fed' at school or college, with their college tutors providing course resources for them, reminding them about deadlines and disciplining them for non-compliance with said deadlines. Coming from an intense level of support to the 'hands-off', independent, adult-focused learning approaches of university made the transition more difficult for these students. Interestingly, one student who had transitioned from college observed that they found it easier because they had studied at a college rather than a school sixth form centre, where learning tends to be more dependent:

> '… perhaps college prepared me even more so than sixth form would have as I was already used to the adult learning system. I believe carrying on with studies at school is very different to college as there is more personal support available from teachers in comparison to college tutors.'

Students whose expectations about support levels are more realistic seem to have found their transition easier than students who expected a lot of support and subsequently felt unsupported.

1.3. Personal development

Many students saw a connection between an independent learning approach and personal development. Students' expectations of how independent they were expected to be in learning at university was an indication of how hard they found the transition. Previous degree students did not

struggle with tasks associated with independent learning (self-directed reading, literature searching and essay writing, for example) because prior experience taught them what to expect. For those that had just come from school or college it was a bigger change, with one student noting 'within the first few weeks of university, I recognised the need to adapt and improve my independent learning skills'. This did not always come naturally, with students recognising that a big shift in their attitude towards learning was needed:

> 'Since commencing the course it has become apparent how personally responsible we are, as individuals, for our academic studies and I now have a full understanding just how critical it is to be totally committed to learning. This is extremely different from my previous education experience, in a college environment, as the responsibility of studying was very much shared by the teaching staff.'

Independence was cited not just in relation to academic work, but also when students referred to their life in general and their skills development beyond academia. Interestingly, it seemed that this was an area where students *had* expected to be independent. For example, traditional, first-time students were aware of, and did not seem to find it difficult to transition to, a life away from their families, with domestic duties, financial responsibility and an increased sense of maturity:

> 'Although this has been a steep learning curve, it couldn't have come at a better time. It has given me the opportunity to become an adult and be self-sufficient.'

In transitioning to university, many recognised the challenges they had faced and, through reflection, appeared to have learnt and developed in the process. This self-awareness may have made the transition easier in that a more reflective and flexible attitude towards new experiences seemed to ease transitions. One student remarked that 'many of the challenges have actually helped me to develop' suggesting that they could see the value of challenges that might arise throughout the transition phase. For others (and this tended to be the mature students), they recognised that experiencing great personal hardships in life before university made them stronger and contributed to their desire to become a nurse. As one student remarked, these hardships:

> '… gave me life skills and knowledge, such as resilience and pragmatism and the importance [of] dignity in care and dying. All these skills are invaluable for becoming a nurse.'

Students who were able to reflect on previous experiences and use pre-university skills tended to transition well. It was more common for mature students – who inherently have more life experiences – to touch on this. Several mature students spoke about how having the right personal attributes was important in being a nurse, and they felt they had developed interpersonal skills and a mature understanding of the world through dealing with personal issues or trauma. Students who had worked as a health care assistant or had some kind of employment or personal experience with nursing-related duties transitioned easier as they already had some idea of what the nursing course would be like:

> 'Looking back working as a Mental Health Support Worker has made me a mature [i.e. responsible] student through the experiences I have developed when I was providing good quality care to a wide range of people.'

Some students used their college experience or previous degree to equip them with the necessary skills to take notes or revise effectively at university, although many others noted that they had to experiment with different note taking techniques to finally find one that worked for them. Several students similarly felt that good time management and planning skills acquired from previous experiences of heavy workloads subsequently prepared them for the nursing course:

> 'I went in to this course knowing that it would be difficult, and felt more prepared to work harder than I did last time at university'.

Some students argued that time out of education was a positive as it could instil a hunger to learn:

> 'Whilst some may argue that being out of education for a sufficient period results in individuals being less likely to return, I believe it further sparked my hunger to be a nurse and return to higher education. I feel that if had begun the [nursing degree] course straight after completing my BA degree, I would not be as eager or enthusiastic as I am today.'

Access to Higher Education courses seemed to help prepare those student who took them, both in terms of preparing them for a return to education and for the actual course content.

'I think I would have struggled a lot more with University than I am doing had I not gone to college last year to do an access course. I believe that the course I undertook, which included biology and sociology helped me a great deal, as did learning how to write an essay and referencing and citing'.

2. Practical tools and support aids

Underpinning this second theme were existing university initiatives that students found useful, and new skills and techniques learnt independently by students.

Existing university initiatives that students valued were mainly the academic components of the course other than lectures. For example, the students really valued what might be termed 'transition enhancing strategies' such as seminar groups, enquiry-based learning (EBL) sessions, peer-assisted student support (PASS) sessions and the practical skills elements of the degree. Students also appreciated that they could access extra resources online and particularly valued the podcasting of lectures (a useful tool for revision) and the virtual learning guides (e.g. on referencing) provided by the university. They also found formative assessments useful in testing their knowledge and allowing them to practise skills during the course but without the marks counting.

While students felt that the university did provide some of the infrastructure for easing transition, participants wrote mainly about the new techniques or skills that they had learnt independently. As with expectations, these skills fell into the academic, social and personal domains.

Academically, many of the students reported using skills to aid comprehension and retention: using flash cards, going over slides before or after the lectures and completing extra reading, for example. Extra reading was found to be a challenge for some students who struggled to form arguments in their essays with the volume of papers they had to read. Other students found independent reading beneficial as they could choose what they found interesting to read or write about. For many students, the standout experience was learning how to take notes effectively. Many students reported that they modified and experimented with multiple note taking styles, learning by experimenting. One student commented that:

'… at university there is no specific way to learn the information, the way you learn best is accepted, whereas at college I found the teacher told us to make notes or do a specific activity and checked upon them.'

Other skills that students felt they developed independently were critical thinking skills, how to be an independent learner and techniques to plan and manage their time. Some students set up group revisions sessions with friends:

'… me and a few fellow nursing students have set up a group revision session once a week whereby we discuss the topics of the week and explain to one another anything we don't understand, and this has been crucial in my understanding of the content.'

Social skills students learnt included enhanced communication skills, learnt from socialising with different cultures, joining in and learning from peers. Some students recognised that they were all in the same boat: 'I need not have worried, everybody I realised were [sic] feeling the same'. For other students, having a solid social support network was vital to their own success; they stated that they learnt 'how important having friends is to me in order to fully enjoy my course' and they were quite reflective over the impact that this would have had on their mental wellbeing: 'I should not have let the anxiety and worry take over me so much'.

In the personal domain, students highlighted specific attitudes that they had developed, such as second-time degree students feeling very 'focused and ready' in their nursing degree compared to their previous degree. Other students struggled with feelings of anxiety and talked about how they had learnt how to overcome this by relaxing and 'taking one step at a time' or rationalising their homesickness: 'remember that you are studying for a degree you are passionate about'.

Cohort check

Four students attended the cohort check focus group and for the most part agreed with our findings. Only in one area was there some disagreement: there were mixed views as to whether the PASS experience was valuable or not. Although most of the cohort check students thought PASS a good idea in principle, they were critical of the way in which it had been implemented personally and did not necessarily see it as an aid to transition.

Discussion

Our findings are largely consistent with the extant literature on transitions, with expectations and support mechanisms (provided either by the institution or self-determined) being our two intertwined themes. Cross-cutting these themes are the three domains academic, social and personal. The former two clearly relate to previous observations (e.g. Tinto 1993; Harvey et al 2006; Briggs et al 2012; Taylor 2012) that social and academic integration are central to a successful transition. However, our findings also imply that the transition process can enhance personal development. While a personal domain has been discussed elsewhere in the general transitions literature (e.g. Gale et al 2015; Trautwein & Bosse 2017), it has been far less frequent than discussions pertaining to academic and social domains.

Among our students, integrating academically created the most anxieties and this seemed to rest on the uncertainty of not knowing how challenging the course would be rather than the actual academic challenges, and on realistic expectations about support levels. There were differences between certain student groups: mature students with previous degrees tended to fare better at transitioning to the academic aspects of university, whilst first-time mature students and younger traditional students tended to struggle. In particular, younger students straight from school or college (where support tended to be paternalistic and intense) struggled with the independent learning approaches of university-level study. On the other hand, younger students had few problems integrating socially; it was mature students who tended to have the difficulties here, perhaps because they were often live-at-home students with domestic and childcare responsibilities on top of their course obligations.

The personal development dimension may have emerged because the nature of modern, professional nursing demands insight and reflection. Many second-time degree students noted in their accounts that nursing degrees were different to other degrees and many of the accounts implied that the transition was to the profession of nursing and not just to a university course, a point noted elsewhere in the literature (e.g. Fergy et al 2011; Taylor 2012). This may explain why those students who had worked or volunteered in a health- or nursing-related environment prior to entry seemed to find transitioning easier.

In terms of easing the transition to university for nursing students, our findings suggest that the focus should be on manging expectations and providing direct support (while also taking advantage

of the resourcefulness of students here) and that these two strategies should be considered in terms of the academic, social and personal domains.

The management of student expectations is critical to a good transition experience. Since the alignment of expectations (between staff and student) is important (McEwan 2015) and expectations are a driver in understanding value-for-money (Neves & Hillman 2017), nursing departments should consider how expectations across all three domains can be aligned. In the academic domain, providing taster session to potential students might help with their expectations. Similarly, students might be helped by the release of sample second-year materials during their first year. In the social domain and personal domains, the sharing of student transition stories (such as the reflections our participants wrote) can help students realise they will not be alone in having anxieties about making friends or having the capability to complete the course. Taylor (2012), using the lens of social capital to view nursing student transition, suggests that 'connections' across four areas – people, the classroom, practice and the profession – can enhance the social and personal aspects of transition and widening expectations to include all four of these areas could help here.

Regarding the provision of formal support across the three domains, nursing departments should avoid the tendency to focus on deficiencies and focus more on students' individual learning needs and how to build upon their strengths (Harvey et al 2006). A strengths-based approach is important because, as we too found, the first year experience is a largely positive one (Yorke & Longden 2008; Gale et al 2015) and students tend to be excited by what lies ahead (HEPI/Unite Students 2017). As our findings and those of Clark (2005) indicate, students can also be resourceful when faced with challenges, discovering their own solutions to challenges and overcoming fears and anxieties without formal support.

Support activities are often associated with first-term induction. Yet induction activities should be continual and not one-off (Harvey et al 2006; Briggs & Clark 2012). Consequently, in the academic domain, this might mean study or research skills development being threaded through the curriculum rather than as standalone first-term activities. Differentiated teaching approaches, so that students can go at their own speed, could also help students adapt more gradually to independent learning (HEPI/Unite Students 2017). In the social domain, it might mean social activities are scheduled throughout the academic year and not just in welcome (freshers') weeks, with different social activities being devised for specific groups including those that might struggle to socialise. In the personal domain, it might mean opportunities are provided for students to use their strengths to

develop themselves or others, e.g. through activities such as volunteering, mentoring or peer-assisted learning (e.g. PASS).

It is also important that support initiatives are monitored for quality once implemented. For example, while there is literature supporting the efficacy of peer tutoring and peer-assisted study schemes (Topping 1996; Dawson et al 2014) and our student accounts were largely positive about PASS, cohort checking revealed there was variation in how PASS was implemented and some students got little, if anything, from it.

Strengths and limitations of the study

One of the strengths of the study is that a reasonably short, written reflection can be a good data source when studying student transitions, a source that could be used in almost every university discipline. The fact that saturation was reached after reading around 50 reflections also indicates that the method was a good way of capturing key transition experiences.

The study is limited by the self-selection of participants; we cannot be sure that we have not missed important information about the transition experience from the majority of students who chose not to allow their reflection to be used in this research. The study is also limited by the timing of the written reflections. The students were 8-12 weeks into the course and were undertaking theoretical components of the course. It could be that other issues would have arisen later in the first year, particularly when they had started practice. The study is also limited by the (not unreasonable) constraints imposed on it by the university ethics committee in relation to a pre-existing dataset not specifically designed to be researched. This meant that useful demographic data about the students that would have enabled formal comparisons to be made was not available.

Conclusion

We set out to explore transitions in nursing students in order to compare nursing students' experiences with those of other disciplines and identify ways of easing the transition for nursing students.

We found that nursing students' transition experiences differ little from other students but that the demographics of nursing student cohorts means that transition experiences may be more diverse.

Harvey et al (2006) remark that '[t]here is no first-year experience; there is a multiplicity of first-year experiences' (p. 106). Our findings indicate that this applies as much to nursing as to any other discipline. Nursing students do understand that they as well as the institution have a role to play in the transition experience. This fits with observations made about students in general elsewhere in the literature, e.g. Clark (2005) notes that transition is built by students and does not just happen and James et al (2010) describe higher education as a 'jointly produced enterprise in which students actively contribute to the outcomes' (p. 6). To a large extent, we found that students see the institutional role as one facilitating them to find their own resources when transitioning, a perspective that clearly fits with the notion of independent learning. As Harvey et al (2006) remark, it is not necessarily that students do not understand the principles of independent learning rather it is that they need help in becoming independent.

If the transition is to be eased, nursing departments need to understand that transition is a process rather than one-off event, a process which involves a joint enterprise between students and university staff especially in terms of expectations and the support provided, and which cuts across academic, social and personal dimensions.

6,132 words

References

Andrew N, McGuiness C, Reid G & Corcoran T (2009). Greater than the sum of its parts: transition into the first year of undergraduate nursing. *Nurse Education in Practice*, **9**, 13-21.

Andrew N, Robb Y, Ferguson D & Brown J (2011). 'Show us you know us': using the senses framework to support professional development of undergraduate nursing students. *Nurse Education in Practice*, **11,** 356-359.

Birks M, Chapman Y, Ralph N, McPherson C, Eliot M & Coyle M (2014). Undergraduate nursing studies: the first-year experience. *Journal of Institutional Research*, **18** (1), 26-35.

Briggs ARJ, Clark J & Hall I (2012). Building bridges: understanding student transition to university. *Quality in Higher Education*, 18(1), 3-21.

Clark MR (2005). Negotiating the freshman year: challenges and strategies among first-year college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, **46**, 296-316.

Corbin J & Strauss A. (2008). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dawson P, van der Meer J, Skalicky J & Cowley K (2014). On the effectiveness of supplemental instruction: a systematic review of supplemental instruction and peer-assisted study sessions literature between 2001 and 2010. *Review of Educational Research*, **84** (4), 609-639.

Fergy S, Marks-Maran D, Ooms A, Shapcott J & Burke L (2011). Promoting social and academic integration into higher education by first year student nurses: the APPL project. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, **35** (1), 107-130.

Gale J, Ooms A, Newcombe P & Marks-Maran D (2015). Students' first year experience of a BSc (Hons) in nursing: A pilot study. *Nurse Education Today*, **35**, 256-264.

Harvey L, Drew S & Smith M (2006). *The first-year experience: a review of literature for the Higher Education Academy*. York: HEA.

Health Education England (2014). *Widening Participation It Matters! Our Strategy and Initial Action Plan.* Leeds: Health Education England.

HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) (2009). *Patterns in higher education: living at home*. Bristol: HEFCE.

HEPI (Higher Education Policy Institute)/Unite Students (2017). *Reality Check: A Report on University Applicants' Attitudes and Perceptions*. Oxford: HEPI.

Heublein U (2014). Student drop-out from German higher education institutions. *European Journal of Education*, 49(4), 497-513.

James R, Krause KL & Jennings C (2010). *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from 1994 to 2009*. Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education.

Levett-Jones T, Lathlean J, Maguire J & McMillan M (2007). Belongingness: a critique of the concept and implications for nursing education. *Nurse Education Today*, **27**, 210-218.

Lincoln YS & Guba EG (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

McEwan MP (2015). Understanding student transition to university: the expectations of essay writing for students and staff. In: *International Enhancement Themes Conference: Enhancement and Innovation in Higher Education*, 9-11 June, Glasgow UK. Available at: http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/paper/understanding-student-transition-to-university-the-expectations-of-essay-writing-for-students-and-staff.pdf

Neeves J & Hillman N (2017). *Student Academic Experience Survey*. York/Oxford: HEA/HEPI.

O'Brien F, Mooney M & Glacken M (2008). Impressions of nursing before exposure to the field. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, **17**, 1843-1850.

Ooms A, Fergy S, Marks-Maran D, Burke L & Sheehy K (2012). Providing learning support for nursing students: a study of two universities. *Nurse Education in Practice*, **13** (2), 89-95.

Palmer M, O'Kane P & Owen M (2009). Betwixt spaces: student accounts of turning point experiences in the first-year transition. *Studies in Higher Education*, **34** (1), 37-54.

Pryjmachuk S & Richards D (2007). Predicting stress in pre-registration nursing students. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, **12** (1), 125-144.

Richardson JTE (1995). Mature students in Higher Education: II. An investigation of approaches to studying and academic performance. *Studies in Higher Education*, **20** (1), 5-17.

Smith K (2004). An investigation into the experience of first-year students of English at British universities. *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education*, **3** (1), 81-93.

Taylor R (2012). Social capital and the nursing student experience. *Nurse Education Today*, **32**, 250-254.

Tinto V (1993). *Leaving College: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. 2nd edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Thalluri J & King S (2009). Understanding and improving first year university student experiences. *Journal of the World Universities Forum*, **2** (1), 67-86.

Topping KJ (1996). The effectiveness of peer tutoring in further and higher education: A typology and review of the literature. *Higher Education*, **32**: 321-345.

Trautwein C & Bosse E (2017). The first year in higher education – critical requirements from the student perspective. *Higher Education*, **73**, 371-387.

Universities UK (2014). *Trends in Undergraduate Recruitment*. London: Universities UK.

Yorke M & Longden B (2008). *The first-year experience of higher education in the UK*. York: HEA.