

STUDENT TRANSITIONS SUPPORT
DEFINITION AND DEVELOPMENT

Final Report

Student Services Transitions Project Group

July 2009

Student Transitions Support – Definition and Development

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1 Summary

We have achieved a number of practical outcomes in this project:

1. Audited SSD transitions support provision.

We have done this both by listing all services across the student life cycle¹ and by comparing each service's contribution by reference to our new framework of transition type. We have found that there is a comprehensive level of support to students. Though we have a few ideas as to where new services might be needed, we have not found any major gaps across the student life cycle or by transition category. This has confirmed our view that Student Services is a major contributor in this field.

2. Identified ideas for service development.

Some services have highlighted areas in which they think service development would be useful, eg an “endings” group in the UCS Skills for Life programme. We have also suggested some ways forward at a strategic level.

3. Created a new framework of transition type.

This framework categorises the type of transitions for which we already know that students come to us for support. This framework allows us to take a more detailed view of both student need and our provision. It helps us answer the question “what do we mean when we say transition?” and should allow a more detailed examination of the student experience from the transitions perspective.

4. Suggested a strategic purpose for SSD work on student transition support.

We have used the new SSD mission statement – “*Support, Develop, Enable*” -to frame a threefold strategic purpose – focusing on support direct to students, helping staff support students and creating collaborative frameworks for the development of student transition support.

5. Suggested areas in which SSD might – strategically – focus its attention in the further development of this work.

We have suggested 5 key areas:

- ❑ International student integration
- ❑ Supporting students with complex mental health difficulties
- ❑ Developing frameworks for collaborating with faculties and the broader academic community on transitions support.
- ❑ Validating our “transition type” framework by hearing the “student voice”.
- ❑ A developmental focus on endings or “out-duction”.

¹ This listing is available on request.

2 Introduction

Why was this project needed?

Student Services has provided a whole range of support to students for many years and though it is not explicitly defined as such, implicitly it is quite clear that much of this provision is aimed at helping students through transitions of one sort or another. The project definition provides as examples the orientation week programme for new undergraduates; a developing induction programme for PGT students; transition support for specific groups such as first generation to HE and commuter students; programmes focussed on transition into the second level of study and addressing the 'sophomore slump'.

But as the project brief points out, we have not yet gone so far as to define a strategic purpose for this work. In setting out on this project the assumption was that there would be advantages in articulating to ourselves and to the university as a whole firstly that we are very much in the business of supporting student transitions and secondly that we do so with a clear purpose in mind.

Lastly, the concept of transition, with its emphasis on movement, chimes with that of *student journey* and with the *student experience* of that journey. Both these phrases occur frequently in current discourse about university life and it would therefore be helpful to us as a department, by clarifying the nature of our work on student transitions, to re-emphasise that Student Services is an active, professional and important contributor to a high-quality student experience, facilitating student development at significant points of change.

The aims and objectives for this project were:

- **Aims**

To 'map' the territory of student transitions support and to affirm a broad vision and purpose for this work.

- **Objectives**

1. To identify the key transition points within the student journey (drawing on material developed within the Student Journey project and work already done in relation to the University's Access Agreement).
2. To map/scope existing student development and support activity relating to the identified transition points and to note areas where provision may be lacking or might be enhanced.
3. To consult with relevant stakeholders and to engage in appropriate external benchmarking.
4. To articulate a vision and strategic purpose for student transitions support, to inform further development of this programme of activity.

The team for the project has been:

Kathryn Axon – Students' Union

Alison Barnett – Disability and Dyslexia Support Service

Ian Munton – Student Support and Guidance

Alan Phillips (Chair) – Student Health and Well-Being

Kim Portlock – University Health Service

Peter Cullen – Multi Faith Chaplaincy Service

Kate Tindle – University Counselling Service

3 What do we mean when we talk about transitions?

To begin with we need to be clear about the meaning of the term “student transition”, as much as anything because it is evident that often it is used in a limited way, for example to describe the changes required of a student when entering university or to describe a series of transitional challenges thrown up by the formal academic cycle. We have felt that this limited usage does not do justice to the whole picture of student transitions, which we are aware of by virtue of our experience in supporting students across a whole range of transitional issues.

“Transition. 1. *The process of changing from one state or condition to another; a period of such change.* 2. *(in music) a momentary modulation.*” Oxford Concise Dictionary.

The dictionary definition of transition is really quite helpful to our thinking about *student* transitions, in the sense that it emphasises that transition is a process not an event and that it represents change, a movement from one state to another. The musical element also offers a helpful metaphor, suggesting a change in key or a means of moving between two connected passages in a broader piece. It also suggests a period of disturbance.

The student's relationship with the university is unlike the one they had with their school – it's much more all embracing. University is a broad and complex society in its own right and most of our students give up the familiarities of home, family and friends to come and live within it for a few years. The relationship is not simply with the university as a *formal institution* but with the whole of *university life*. Added to which, they do this during a phase of their lives which for many of them would in any case be particularly intense and full of change. So university is likely to throw up a whole array of challenges for the student to deal with: intellectual, social and personal, and these challenges will take place at various points during the student's period of relationship with the university.

These transitions are sometimes spoken of as if they were all predictable aspects of the academic cycle. The truth is that some are but many are not. Those that are not will be related to the student's growth as a person and to the events that they experience whilst at university.

In an earlier piece of work carried out by a group looking at the subject in the context of the university's access agreement, a number of key aspects of transitions were identified, which seem to complement and chime in with the ideas expressed here.

- **Key aspects of student transitions**

1. It's a continual process of change, covering the whole student life cycle.
2. There are many transitions, of which the transition into university is only one.
3. In supporting this process, we are developing both the academic and social capacity of students, for the benefit of the student, the university and in the longer term for the economy and society as a whole.
4. The process is inclusive of large numbers of students – perhaps all - not just the “inclusion” groups who are perhaps the most challenged and vulnerable.
5. This all feeds into the university's learning and teaching agenda, into retention, into employability – in other words, into key areas of university business.
6. Giving attention to the whole process of transition fits into the context of broader access to university but also into the wider picture of developing the student experience.
7. The university needs to recognise this as a real and important process: that the support given to students is valuable and, indeed, a core dimension of university business.

This is the understanding of transitions which has supported our work in this project. On the basis of this we have gone on to audit current SSD provision, develop a new framework to illustrate the different types of transitions that we deal with, give detailed examples of how those transitions manifest themselves, set out a strategic purpose for our transitions work and identify a number of ways in which we can continue to develop it.

- **A new framework of transition categories**

It was fundamental to this project that we asked the question “what do we mean by transitions?” When we answered this question for ourselves (as described above) we inevitably moved on to talk about different *types* or *categories* of transition. (The range of transitions is implicitly illustrated in the audit of current activity across the life cycle but we needed a clearer way of demonstrating the characteristics and differences).

So we developed a broad framework of transitions type. (See fig.1) This emerged not from a first principles discussion but from a reflection upon the reasons for which students already come to Student Services for support. So it is well-grounded in practical experience.

Fig 1: A new framework of transition categories

Category of Transition	Examples
<p>Academic Cycle</p> <p>Transitions caused by specific and predictable events in the academic year.</p>	<p>Joining the university, induction and orientation, first exams/assessed work, spending time abroad, writing up and graduating.</p>
<p>Personal, Emotional, Developmental</p> <p>Psychological and social transitions, some of which may be set off by university life, some of which may simply be part of a normal process of personal development.</p>	<p>Recognising that students are moving through an intense and highly developmental phase of their lives. Becoming an independent adult, beginning and ending relationships, searching for a sense of purpose, dealing with success or failure are all examples of the kinds of challenges faced in this category of transition.</p>
<p>Intellectual/Academic²</p> <p>The transitions which form part of developing as a learner, “learning to learn”.</p>	<p>Making the move from school to university mode of study, working independently, dealing with the raising of the bar, with higher levels of expectation intellectually, also moving from undergraduate to postgraduate study, from masters to Ph.D.</p>
<p>Sense of Belonging</p> <p>Transitions related to the process of becoming part of and detaching from communities.</p>	<p>The student leaves an established social network to come to university. Leaving home, family and friends, represents a real transitional challenge.</p> <p>The student needs to feel connected, that they fit in somehow....establishing a place in a new social group, in a new institution, developing or changing that sense of belonging over a number of years. Lastly, preparing to leave and begin the process again.</p>

² Some colleagues have said that they see this category as being substantially the same as “academic cycle”. Whilst there are clearly links, we see them as different in the sense that whilst “academic cycle” brings about predictable challenges for everyone at more or less the same time, the process of learning to learn is a very personal one and takes place at different rates for different people.

These categories are not mutually exclusive (for example, emotional crises and transitions can be set off by events arising from the academic cycle and from new intellectual challenges) but they are different enough to show that we are dealing with a wide range of different transitions, some of which can easily be mapped against milestones in the student journey, some of which cannot.

We have gone on in subsequent pages to elaborate each of these categories and in appendix 1 to say how each of our services contributes in each category of transition.

Transitions in the Academic Cycle	We refer here to predictable events in the academic calendar/cycle that all students will encounter and the transitions that they cause. This is the most easily observed and recognised form of student transition.
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- **Finding out about Sheffield University**

Researching universities/courses
Open day visits
Receiving information
Application to universities
Receiving offers and making choices

- **First contact and Joining**

Receiving preparatory information
Preparing to join
Joining Sheffield University
Registration
Putting in place adjustments (for disabled students)
Departmental induction
Meeting staff and fellow students
Introduction to the programme
Understanding course and module layout

- **Encountering and understanding new academic demands**

Understanding demands and expectations: types of learning and assessment
Understanding how to be a successful student

First academic experiences
Experiencing group work
Completing first assessments
Completing first exams
Preparing for resits
Learning from results

Expectations of study at next level
Introduction of new assessment levels, at different levels
Meeting new tutors, new peers
Preparing for and undertaking placements
Studying abroad
Conducting research

- **Ending, next steps and new beginnings**

Establishing fitness to practise
Finals
Graduation/Ending

Postgraduate study (where a new cycle begins)

<p>Personal, Emotional, Developmental Transitions</p>	<p>Recognising that students are moving through an intense and highly developmental phase of their lives. Becoming an independent adult, beginning and ending relationships, searching for a sense of purpose, dealing with success or failure, these are all aspects of transition.</p>
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- **Becoming an independent adult**

Leaving home- whether a secure or insecure environment
 Fending for oneself- managing money, bills, household responsibilities
 Moving from sheltered environment of halls to private accommodation
 Part time job
 Additional changes to environment- due to studying abroad, ERASMUS students, year out in industry/sandwich courses
 Finishing a degree and starting work

- **Beginning and ending relationships**

With partners – if left behind, or if studying together
 With friends – both those left behind & those in place of study.
 With family – geographical difficulties, “empty nest”, pressure of being 1st generation in HE (“Educating Rita”)
 Significant events such as bereavement or termination of pregnancy.
 Taking time out because of e.g. ill health
 Loss of connections with social networks & peer group, e.g. due to year abroad during studies
 Leaving University and connections made here

- **Searching for a sense of purpose**

Choice of degree course often the vehicle for this
 Taking on other responsibilities – roles in societies, mentoring others
 Decision whether to enter post grad studies

- **Dealing with success or failure.**

Graduation, celebrating achievement.
 Coping with disappointment, under achievement, or unfulfilled/ unrealistic expectations
 Decision to withdraw from course

- **Sense of identity**

Cultural differences (especially for International students)
 Emerging sexual self, “coming out”
 Changes in self- may be positive or negative- personal growth, emerging mental health problems
 Changes in (perceived) status, identity and class- especially for mature and part time students

Intellectual and Academic Transitions	Learning in a University differs markedly in a number of ways to academic life in school or college. Many of these differences are obvious and can be managed with relative ease. Many, however, are implicit and unspoken and as such may be difficult to adjust to, understand and/or overcome. These may be physical and relate to size and structure of an institution, they may be far subtler and relate to necessary styles of learning and codes of conduct.
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Transition into and during Level 1

- Induction/Orientation
- The 'New' rules of engagement – how to respond in differing learning situations – i.e. lectures, seminars, group work, tutorials etc
- First tutorial – variable from previous interactions with staff and peers
- Alternative terminology/Jargon/Dialogue
- Differing student/staff relationships – where do students stand in the pecking order/has their relationship with tutors become closer or do they feel far removed
- Becoming an independent learner
- Recognising academic strengths and weaknesses
- Developing strategies for academic learning
- Independent Learning – how do students learn this? Is it explained, is it by mistake?
- Developing research skills and in some case professional skills
- Working as a group for the first time
- Changing roles as peers – competition for affection/praise etc
- Measurement of ability/attainment – what does success and achievement look like?
- Coping with failure (or perceived failure)
- Moving from being the best to one of the rest (big fish – little fish)

Transitions into and during Level 2

- Increased emphasis on results
- Is it too late to rethink?
- Degree becomes entwined in future career
- Sense of anti-climax (Sophomore Slump)

Transitions into and during Level 3 (Final year)

- Development of professional skills
- Development of research skills (increased importance placed)

Moving to Postgraduate Taught

- Accelerated learning at PGT Level
- Shifting dynamics of relationships between staff and peers

Moving to Postgraduate Research

- Independence bordering on isolation at PGR
- Unclear deadlines and targets

<p>Sense of Belonging</p>	<p>The student leaves an established social network to come to university. Leaving home, family and friends, represents a real transitional challenge.</p> <p>The student needs to feel connected, that they fit in somehow....establishing a place in a new social group, in a new institution, developing or changing that sense of belonging over a number of years. Lastly, preparing to leave and begin the process again.</p>
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Arrival and Year 1

- Contacting people through social networking sites, for academic courses and residences.
- Making friends initially, making first connections (from the very first hours often).
- Meeting new people in accommodation settling down with flat mates.
- Welcomes and orientations in departments.
- Intense week of Freshers activities.
- Getting to know the physical layout of the place.
- Key places, department, Union, IC/Library – these are also social hubs.
- Making first contacts with societies, sports teams.
- For students with a faith, beginning to find places of worship and meet faith groups.
- Interim period when may also be visiting home quite often.

This is a very intense period for all – leading to successful integration for some, isolation for others, maybe quite a few left ambivalent.

- Followed by progressive process of refinement through first term especially.
- As the student gets into their academic work, feeling “yes, this is the place for me”, or otherwise.
- As the first year progresses, the transition into the second year comes more into focus, notably the question of to live with in Year 2.
- Leaving rituals at end of Year 1.

Year 2

- Learning to live with friends in new accommodation – possibility of living arrangements not working out.
- Sometimes working with new groups of people on academic courses.
- Sometimes a sense of drifting in the second year (the “sophomore slump”)
- Year 2 may be a transitional year in itself.

Year 3

- May be another group of people to live with...
- Sense of belonging may be deepest at this point and yet, paradoxically, the sense of an impending ending and detachment is also strong.
- Endings – personal and academic. Leaving rituals, some student, some institutional (like graduation). Saying goodbye to friends and staff.

- Careers – thinking about moving into employment and establishing new connections and new identities/sense of belonging.
- Leaving processes – into a new career, a new course, or possibly limbo...living with parents again?

Other categories and issues

PGCE – where do I belong, university or school? (Working in schools with new work colleagues to large extent)

Leave of Absence/Year Abroad – complex issues of detachment and re-integration: catching up with changes, with academic cycle, out of sync with social group.

PGT – How to integrate? Might feel like a bit of rush (no sooner beginning than preparing to end) depending on whether have been Sheffield student previously.

PGR – identity issues – is the researcher a member of staff or a student? Age – older than majority of students, so attachment to prevailing student culture might be difficult. Isolation is often an issue, even within one's own department. Endings are sometimes a problem.

4 Auditing our transitions support provision

We decided to audit Student Services³ transition support provision in two distinct ways.

The first was to ask each service to complete a “transitions map” of current activity, featuring a description of the activity and its transitions purpose, and showing how it applied to students across the student journey, from pre-entry to postgraduate to ending.

The second was to ask each service to describe how it contributed to transitions support by reference to a new framework of *types* of transition that we developed during the project.

So our audit took two forms: by reference to the student life cycle or journey and by reference to different types of transition. The detailed results of these audits are set out in appendices 1 and 2.

4.1 Looking at transition support from a student journey perspective

Looking at our transition maps at appendix 1, a number of comments spring to mind, serving as learning points from this process:

1. The support is *extremely* comprehensive in nature; there are numerous transitions support activities to be found, right across the department. Much of what we do in the department can actually be described as transitions support. (Hence: *Support, Develop, Enable*).
2. This emphasises the key role that Student Services plays on this issue in a university-wide context and, at the same time, demonstrates the importance of transitions support to students themselves, otherwise these services would not be used extensively as they are.
3. There is no sense in which use of these services, except in special cases like disability support, is limited to “inclusion” groups or even to the most challenged and vulnerable. They are used by students across the whole range of the student body. This suggests that transitions support is a key aspect of university business and an essential element of a good student experience.
4. Generally speaking, current transitions support activity is available right across the student life cycle. Despite the limited nature of the discourse on transition support, which tends to focus heavily on early student life (eg induction and first year experience) we can see that in reality it is required and indeed provided throughout the life cycle.
5. One area in which we could clearly do more is “endings”. Perhaps previously this has not been seen as part of our business but there are obvious advantages to both students and the institution in helping them to accomplish

³ Where we refer to Student Services provision in the report, we also acknowledge the additional contribution made by the Students’ Union.

a successful transition out of the university. Alison McDow's intern study on endings⁴ showed that provision across the university is at best patchy and this is an area upon which Student Services itself has not concentrated. It is an area in which we could profitably collaborate with academic departments.

6. Finally, though one might expect certain parts of Student Services to contribute most strongly in this area by virtue of their explicitly supportive purpose (ie Student Support and Guidance and Student Health and Well-Being) it is strikingly evident that every section contributes strongly to this element of the department's business.

4.2 Looking at transition support by category of transition

We first set out the general framework of 4 types of transition and then went on to elaborate them in more detail. We then asked each service to provide a narrative description of how they contribute to transition support in each of these categories. Their responses are set out in appendix 2.

Our learning points from this can be summarised as follows:

1. The framework seems fairly robust and capable of embracing most if not all of the issues that students bring to us. Once having established that transitions support is required throughout the student life cycle, this seems a convenient and not over-complicated way of describing the *territory* we work in.
2. The framework shows that there is a complexity to the nature of student transitions which is not well-reflected in the current debate but which, once acknowledged, can help us gain a clearer understanding both of this subject and of the student experience more generally, and enable us to plan our interventions more effectively.
3. Student Services activity covers all of this framework, once again demonstrating the comprehensive nature of our provision (albeit there is always more to be done) and the contribution made by all parts of the department.
4. What the framework also suggests is that although Student Services contributes strongly in this area, the territory is not uniquely ours. Other professional services but most of all academic departments also work with students on transitions support in all of the categories described. We already collaborate with academic and professional services colleagues but this suggests that if we want to think more about how we go about transitions support and to develop provision, we ought to do so in partnership.

⁴ "Marking an End for Final Year Students" Alison McDow, Clemson intern, 2009

5 Student Transitions Support - Strategic Purpose

The new Student Services mission statement (“*Support, Develop, Enable*”) provides a helpful way of framing a strategic purpose for our work on student transitions support.

Support, Develop, Enable

... our *students* in their ability to negotiate these transitions successfully, enhancing the student experience

... *staff* to support students effectively, across the whole range of transitions, throughout the student journey

... *collaborative frameworks* which allow us to work on transitions issues together with partners across the university, remembering that student transition support is at heart a collaborative task

Listed below are some suggested areas in which Student Services could – strategically – focus its attention in the future development of this work. Bearing in mind that service capacity is already stretched we have leaned towards identifying areas which we know complement the agreed SSD strategic direction in 0910.

- Integration of international students, also PGT/PGR (*Sense of Belonging*)
- Support for students with complex mental health difficulties (*Psychological, Emotional, Developmental*)
- Setting up frameworks for collaborating with Faculties on transition support issues – start by working with FDLTs. We could also include LeTS in this. Aim to develop a dialogue with the academic community on student transitions, much as we want to do on student sense of belonging. (*All*)
- Validating the “transitions categories” framework - hearing the student voice. (*All*)
- Focusing on endings and “outduction”, in collaboration with academic departments.

We have also identified one new area (“endings”) and emphasised the need both to hear what students say about their experience of transition and to work with

colleagues in Faculties and possibly LeTS on taking this work forward. By doing so we can work towards the position where we have a broadly-based group working with a shared understanding of student transitions and with a common developmental agenda.

6 Concluding Remarks

It is very clear from the audit work we have carried out that Student Services is a very major contributor to the institutional task of supporting students through the many transitions they experience whilst studying at this university. An area which we have not investigated in any depth but which may bear further examination is the extent to which this is, or should be, *connected* across the department and with the academic community.

Having audited current activity we have developed a framework for understanding student transitions which very much broadens the current terms of debate and enables us to think more creatively about the nature of the student experience and the nature of the support that students require from us and colleagues in the broader university. We have recommended that this understanding be enhanced by asking students directly about their experience of transitions and, though it is not on our list of recommendations, perhaps for the same reason we should ask academic colleagues about their experience of providing support.

Finally, we have come forward with a straightforward framework for thinking strategically about the Student Services Department involvement in this field and suggested a number of areas for development. We have exercised some restraint here, bearing in mind the current and emerging pressure on resources.

We look forward to hearing colleagues' response to our report and to taking this important work forward in the coming year.

Student Transitions Support Project Team