



University
of Worcester



Improving Direct Entry Student Experience of Transition to Top-Up/Honours Degree



Purpose

Well-established sector research identifies a number of key transition points in the undergraduate student journey and that students' experiences prior to and at these points can have consequences for student satisfaction, progression, retention and achievement. Much of this work focuses on students who commence their University experience at Level 4 and progress (or not) through the full 360 credits of their chosen Honours Degree.

Many of the challenges and opportunities faced by these students and the strategies employed to enhance their transitions are relevant to the experiences of Direct Entry students. However, students who progress to Top-Up Degrees or transfer into Level 5/6 of existing Honours Degrees represent a particular point of transition with some distinct student needs.

This guidance aims to provide practical advice for course leaders and staff who deliver Top-Up degrees or encounter students who enter Honours Degrees at Level 5 or Level 6 (Direct Entry students) with a view to improving students' experiences of transition and positively impacting on their satisfaction and achievement in their Honours Degrees.

Based on research, students' views of their transition experience and the personal experiences of staff working with Direct Entry students, this guidance identifies:

- key factors and challenges that may impede transition for Top-Up and Direct Entry students
- opportunities for enhancement and examples of effective practice in managing the successful transition experience of Direct Entry students

The transition experience

Students' experience of transition into a course at Level 6 (or for some Level 5) and the ways in which this is managed can have a significant impact on student satisfaction and achievement. Data demonstrates that attainment of good Honours Degrees can be lower than other First Degree entrants completing in the same year, particularly for 'singular' Direct Entry students who transfer into a degree at Level 6.

In this context, the term 'Direct Entry' refers to two distinct groups of students:

- those progressing from a Foundation Degree or HND delivered at the University or a partner to a bespoke 'Top-Up' Degree or to an identified Honours Degree course at Level 6 (or Level 5)
- those who join degree courses at Level 6 (or Level 5), as transfers in from other Universities or who change course at UW and are often 'singular' students joining an established group

Where a Top-Up degree at Level 6 is 'bespoke', e.g. approved as the identified progression route from a Foundation Degree, the students' transition experience may be more successful as this is clearly defined and aligned, seamless and well-supported, taught by familiar staff and at the same venue.

Other Direct Entrant/Top-Up students who join existing full Honours Degree programmes at Level 6 (or Level 5) may not be familiar with the environment, the teaching team, their 'new' peers or the University. They can feel that they have to 'hit the ground running' as they re-orientate themselves whilst also 'stepping up' to the Honours Degree challenge. They may sit somewhere between the needs of 'the first year experience' and being ready for Honours Degree study at Level 6.

What do Direct Entry/Top-Up students say about their transition?

Positive Experiences

"As a cohort we formed a bond during the FD... led to a great amount of peer support..."

"I had access to forthcoming years reading lists... I could start to prepare..."

"All the tutors are friendly and supportive"

"University overall is very welcoming"

"Readily available support from my new PAT"

"I was very excited by the challenge of completing my degree"

Negative Experiences

"I had a very poor start...DE to 2nd year and completed welcome week with 1st years... so was unable to meet people we were doing the course with..."

"I did not feel welcome in the group... I was surprised at lack of engagement and enthusiasm of the other students..."

"...a complete difference in how lecturers deal with students... lack of organisation...much larger groups...lost motivation during Top-Up"

"...coming on to last year...I had distinct disadvantage...(others) had already started projects and assignments..."

"I found the workload a lot harder to manage this year... Anxious...higher expectation for independent study..."

"Communication...and lack of knowledge of some tutors in supporting DE students...Lack of information, e.g. module selection"

"I didn't understand the submission 'rules', whereabouts of rooms, where to find tutors..."

Factors that may challenge or impede the transition experience

Key points in students' transition experiences typically reflect challenging moments, e.g. a step change in academic tasks or a transition in personal and social life. Making an effective transition when faced with change can often take longer, with the transition to final Honours year compounded for some Direct Entry students through their change in environment of study, location, peers, course team and a range of other factors.

Thus Direct Entry/Top-Up students may be at a distinct disadvantage if their experience of transition (or their perception of it) involves:

- entering a 'new'/different course
- new place of study
- with new staff
- a new group of students
- new 'systems'
- or they perceive the transition as making a significant leap in expectations (one or any combination of these).

There may be perceived and/or actual threats or barriers to progression and potential issues for Direct Entry students that may impede their transition experience. These factors fall into the themes identified in Table 1.¹

TABLE 1 - FACTORS THAT MAY CHALLENGE/IMPEDE TRANSITION EXPERIENCE FOR DIRECT ENTRY STUDENTS – KEY THEMES	
THEMES	CHALLENGES/ISSUES
Environment	Physical, e.g. new location, classrooms, different sites, travel, 'finding their way around', group sizes; a 'campus bubble' mind-set
Social	Lack of peer support, meeting new peers, need for friendships, entering larger groups, relationships with tutors
Academic challenge	Perceived gap (by students and Level 6 staff), academic skills, 'Will I be able to cope?'; 'Have I been adequately prepared?', particularly when topping up or direct entry to Level 6'; information literacy
Learning experiences	Whether prepared for autonomy and making choices, shared understanding of 'independent' learning, inconsistency and differences in learning, teaching, and assessment styles from previous course
Academic practices	Different expectations, language used in HE, academic writing, referencing, style of feedback, differences in L&T and assessment methods, different VLE
Support	Change in personal tutor and approach to PAT role, need supportive 'Top-Up' staff that value HN/FD, IS supervision, disability support may change from HE in FE to University HE
Communication	Larger/different teaching team, use of UW email, information prior to transition, how this is provided (in person, via email, social media, hard copy)
Expectations	'independent learning', transition to Honours a 'greater jump/leap', 'Will I cope?'; perceptions of change in expectation
Student Self-Efficacy (Social and Academic), Emotional, Resilience	Belief in ones' ability to achieve desired results, problem solving, maintaining a positive outlook and developing resilience, skills, e.g. goal setting; differences in support and guidance from tutors
Practical	Systems, processes e.g. different VLE, module selection, student-led timetabling, timing of IS topic/proposal, electronic assignment submission, differences in design and structure of delivery at Level 6 (e.g. FDs 'day-release' from work)

¹ Summarised from Share and Inspire session June 2018, Student Survey, L&T projects, the QAA Enhancement Theme 'Student Transition' and Thomas, 2012

Managing the Transition Experience

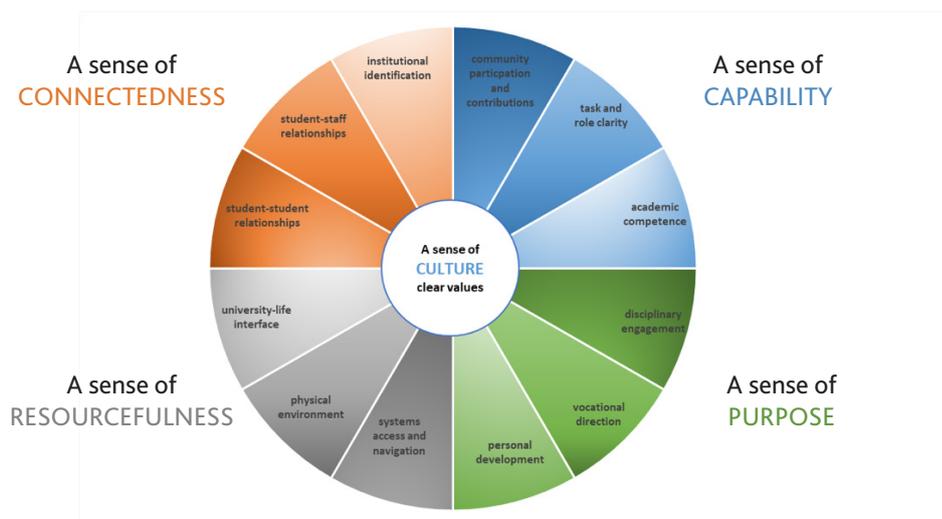
Engaging early with students within the transition process into and through HE is important if students are to establish effective approaches for learning throughout their undergraduate studies. This should be easier when Direct Entry students are already UW students, however successful transition depends on a number of factors and the receptiveness and preparedness of both staff and students to recognise the particular needs of Direct Entry students, whilst taking care not to overemphasise difference.

Nurturing a sense of belonging is essential and can be achieved through promoting supportive peer relations, meaningful interactions between staff and students, developing students' knowledge, confidence and identity as HE learners and facilitating a HE experience that is relevant to the students' interests and future goals (Thomas, 2012, p.9).

'...It is the human side of Higher Education that comes first – finding friends, feeling confident and, above all, feeling a part of your course of study and the institution – that is the necessary starting point for academic success...' (Thomas, 2012, Foreword, p.1)

Lizzio (2006) acknowledges there is not one right way to manage transition but that understanding students' needs and concerns as they commence their Higher Education (University) experience provides a sound basis for designing effective orientation and transition strategies. He defines these according to his 'Five Senses of Success': the student's senses of capability, connectedness, purpose, resourcefulness and academic culture (see Figure 1 – Lizzio's Model of the Five Senses of Successful Transition).

Figure 1 – Lizzio's Model of the Five Senses of Successful Transition (adapted from Lizzio, 2006)²



Strategies for Successful Direct Entry Student Transition - adapted from The Five Senses of Successful Transition (Griffith University: First Year Experience Project, Lizzio, 2006)

The transition experience for Direct Entry or Top-Up students can involve changes in culture, purpose, and connectedness and this may challenge their resourcefulness and capabilities to succeed. Thinking about these different senses of a student's transition can assist in identifying student and staff expectations, potential barriers to transition and approaches to improve the transition experience. Examples of effective practice emerged through consultation and research conducted as part of the University of Worcester's Direct Entry Student Transitions project. This is not a definitive list nor is it intended that all the examples be used with any one course or student group. Instead it provides examples of different approaches that staff and students have found to be effective in supporting their transition to Top-Up/Level 6.

2 Lizzio, A. (2006) *Designing an orientation and transition strategy for commencing students: applying the five senses model*. Griffith University, Australia available at http://fyhe.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Lizzio-TheFivesensesofStudentSuccessSelf-AssessmentFrameworkforplanningandreviewofOT_doc.pdf (Accessed 1st July 2019)

1. Developing students' sense of capability:

This relates to how well students understand what is expected of them, their mastery of basic academic skills and their level of commitment to contributing to their learning community. This impacts on their self-efficacy and resilience and is important to becoming capable HE students. Students who are better prepared for HE study have greater academic success and are more satisfied and persistent with their studies. Where possible, this development should start through their Level 4/5 study and can be influenced if studying a HND/FD.

Actions: Clarify and negotiate expectations, check provision for development of academic skills and engage students as active members of their 'new' learning community.

Examples of Effective Practice:

1. Scaffolding development of academic and study skills through HND or FD curriculum, e.g. structured reading tasks, formative assessment and practical skills (see Learner Journeys Toolkit)
2. Summer Schools, include Independent Study proposals, module selection, activities to build relationships (see video vignette)
3. Bridging sessions and on-line tasks to complete prior to Top-Up/Level 6
4. Bespoke induction for Top-Up and DE students
5. Create an interactive glossary of terms for module 'terminology', e.g. learning outcomes, formative assessment and summative assessment. This could include a talking head/video of a student explaining key terms
6. Review L, T&A approaches in FD/HND for alignment with Top-Up routes (bespoke or Level 6 Hons). (Note use of periodic review/AER/minor modifications processes to support change)

2. Developing students' sense of connectedness:

Students with stronger connections are more likely to be successful learners, effective colleagues and happier people. Depends on the quality of relationships with peers and with staff, and students' feelings of identification with and belonging to their place of study, e.g. the University and/or the new group or course they are entering.

Actions: Develop connectedness by providing opportunities for students to form good working relationships with their peers and with staff and encouraging them to be involved with the University (prior to Top-Up/entering Level 6).

Examples of Effective Practice:

1. Effective link tutor visits to partners, with scheduled transition progression talks
2. Visits/talks/meetings with HND/FD students by Top-Up/Level 6 Course Leaders, e.g. Introduction to IS
3. Visits and talks at Level 4/Level 5 from previous Top-Up students
4. Visits of partner staff and students to the University during their HND/FD
5. Fostering positive and productive staff relationships between HND/FD and Top-Up/Hons Degree team and between University and Partner
6. Peer-to-peer mentoring/Student Academic Mentoring (see video vignette)
7. 'Study Buddy Groups' (see video vignette)

Use of Facebook groups to form professional networks for DE students as part of induction experience both pre-course and on starting the course

3. Developing students' sense of purpose

Students with a clear sense of purpose are more likely to find their study rewarding and will also be more committed and persistent when the work gets challenging. This depends on their engagement with their course and discipline of study, their sense of vocation and their capacity to set personal goals.

Actions: Provide opportunities for students to be as clear as possible about their reasons for progressing to Honours Degree and their choice of degree, to see the relevance of their course of study and to systematically develop their strengths and talents.

Examples of Effective Practice:

1. Development of critical reflective skills, action planning and guided use of a reflective portfolio (were used e.g. see video vignette on use of PebblePad)
2. PAT role can include needs assessment, goal setting, action planning and developing professional and employability skills
3. Link Tutor/Top-Up Course Leader visits to L5 include building employability and professional skills, careers opportunities linked with further study

Use of Facebook groups to form professional network for DE students as part of induction experience both pre-course and on starting the course

4. Developing students' sense of resourcefulness

Successful students not only know how to study but also how to proactively manage the challenges of their whole HE experience. This depends on their ability to navigate the University system to get the help and information they need, willingness to speak up if they have a problem and an ability to balance their work, life and study commitments.

Actions: Help students to be more resourceful by providing clear and accessible roles, procedures and resources and encourage timely help-seeking behaviour.

Examples of Effective Practice:

1. Early information and support for DE students in making choices, e.g. progression routes, module selection clinics, access to L6 content, IS preparation, placement selection and preparation
2. Familiarisation with systems and processes they will meet 'at University', e.g. use of Blackboard, SOLE
3. Early identification of DE students with disabilities and requiring reasonable adjustments/specific support needs to ensure smooth transition to new service provision
4. Plan induction activities and 'clinics' (on campus and on-line) specifically targeted for different needs of DE and Top-Up students
5. Designated 'Top-Up' Personal Tutors or Liaison Tutors (prior to and after transition)
6. Ensure the PAT identifies and meets specifically with students entering at 'non-standard' points in a course, e.g. Direct Entry or student transfer from another course.

5. Developing students' sense of academic culture

Successful students know the value of learning 'how and why things are done' and what is important or valued in their 'new' culture. Cultural competence depends on a shared appreciation of the core values of the university/place of study and how these inform their approaches to study and working relationships with fellow staff and students.

Actions: We can help students by working in partnership to identify what they understand by the questions: "what is a university?"; "what is Higher Education?"

Examples of Effective Practice:

1. Bespoke induction for Top-Up and DE students
2. Through scaffolding and academic skills development, develop understanding and skills of independent learning (see video vignette – 'Using Resource Lists and Reading Activities')
3. Staff engagement with the Library's Learner Journeys project and audit tool for course teams (see video vignette and 'Learner Journeys' resources)
4. The Flipped Classroom (see video vignette 'Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) – Blackboard and the Flipped Classroom')
5. Visits and talks at Level 4/Level 5 from previous Top-Up students
6. Clearly define PAT role at Level 4/Level 5 (for HND/FD, at UW and partners) to ensure building towards Level 6 expectations

Direct entry students who transfer into a Degree at Level 6 (or Level 5) from other universities or who change course at UW

Being aware of students that transfer into a degree programme at Level 6 is essential, particularly if they are 'singular' students joining an established group. These students are particularly at risk of underachieving at Honours Degree and may be vulnerable as they face more of the challenges of transition as a result of multiple changes at a critical point in their degree. They may also have personal reasons outside of our immediate influence that have led to their decision to change course or place of study. Equally, singling out and overemphasising difference may be counterproductive to their confidence and sense of belonging unless handled appropriately. All of the strategies identified to support transition will be relevant to these students.

However, key to meeting their specific needs is knowing that they exist and are joining the course, particularly in a modular degree. Remember:

- Ensure that Admissions Tutors alert Course Leaders and Module Leaders when students are joining degrees at 'untypical' entry points
- If possible, make contact with the student before or as they start – check they are invited to Top-up/Level 6 induction where available (not first year induction)
- Check class lists to identify Direct Entry students (the start dates in their student number are likely to be different to the main cohort)
- Arrange for an early Personal Academic Tutorial meeting to identify their needs, provide support and signpost to other services
- Help them make connections with the group, e.g. through group activities, a peer mentor/study buddy
- Early contact with an Independent Study Tutor and/or allocation of an Independent Study Supervisor to guide the student through the process

Course Leader Top-Tips: Improving DE students' transition experience: What Works?

Course Leader Top-Tips have been identified across different phases of the students' transitional journey and reflect the effective practice that was established from the Direct Entry Transitions Project course leader 'audit', student focus group and the Share and Inspire event.

Table 2: SUMMARY OF COURSE LEADER TOP-TIPS TO IMPROVE DE STUDENTS' TRANSITION EXPERIENCE

PHASE	EFFECTIVE PRACTICE
Pre-Entry to Level 6 Hons/Top-Up	Curriculum alignment in course development of FDs/HNDs and Top-Ups, includes L,T&A strategies as well as subject content and skills.
Level 4 onwards	Positive and productive staff relationships between HND/FD and Top-Up/Hons Degree course teams; between University and Partner
Level 5 - Semester 1	Effective link tutor visits to partners, with early engagement with students to foster their sense of belonging to the University and scheduled transition progression talks
Level 5 - Semester 2	Early information and support for DE entry students in making choices e.g. progression routes, module selection clinics, access to L6 content/reading lists, Independent Study preparation, identifying placements
	Access to reading lists/pre-semester reading and activities sent by course leaders with 'looking forward to meeting you/welcome message'
	Bridging sessions and on-line tasks to familiarise students with expectations of Level 6 study
	Visits of partner staff and students to the University and University staff to the students at the partner, e.g. introduction to Top-Up course, module choices, Independent Study processes (start thinking about research/project focus and topics)
	Peer support - Using existing top up/L6 students to meet with students at level 5
Summer vacation between Level 5 and Level 6	Two day Summer School (July/early Sept)/summer activities including help for students with IS proposals
	Bridging sessions and on-line tasks to familiarise students with expectations of Level 6 study
	Check Admissions information/Class Lists and identify Direct Entry students to enable early conversations, familiarisation and understanding of requirements, identify any individual learning support needs
Welcome/Induction	Use of Facebook groups – to form professional network for DE students as part of induction experience both pre-course and on starting the course
	Bespoke Induction programme and academic skills development for DE students (mandatory sessions for the 'top-up'/L6 courses)
	Signposting to additional support services, e.g. FirstPoint, Disability and Dyslexia Service, Finance, Counselling
From Wks 1-2	Dedicated 'top-up' personal tutors (PAT) or designated liaison tutors and PAT Guidance
	Early identification of DE students and focussed meeting with PAT to provide point of contact, check settling into course, identify any individual learning support needs
	Introduction to Students Union and their on campus services to support students
On-going	Buddy System/Peer-to-peer mentoring (e.g. SAMs - Student Academic Mentors, CAMH Top-Up 'Study-Buddy Groups')
	Structured/timetabled tutorial programme
Progress Weeks	Bespoke PAT tutorials, Careers advice

The final word – students' top-tips for students' transitions to Top-Up Degree

Groups of Top-Up Degree students reflected on their experiences and provided their top-tips for other students faced with transition as a Direct Entry student or entering a Top-Up Degree. These are very practical approaches and are not unique to these groups of students. However, they reflect the lived experiences of these students as they faced this period of transition and have been incorporated into the University's Essential Guide for Students:

- Before you start the course, do some reading about Level 6 study
- Access and complete any pre-course reading activities provided
- Access the University's online study skills pages
- Attend any induction activities and/or summer school
- Get to know the University, using the campus map from Reception
- Learn about the staff who will be teaching you by looking at the staff profiles on the University website
- Spend time getting to know your fellow students; join in with discussions and share ideas and experiences
- Find a "study buddy" or a small group of peers and work together
- Try to orientate yourself to the University online platforms and systems like SOLE and Blackboard. Make a note of contact details of people who can support you, e.g. IT support, SOLE help
- As soon as you start, take note of any dates you are given for assessments and deadlines. This will help you to set yourself an action plan
- Make an appointment to meet with your Personal Academic Tutor as early in the course as you can – get to know them and understand their role
- Follow Facebook and/or Twitter groups set up by the School / Department / Course you will be joining
- If you have a disability or learning need, discuss this with your PAT at the earliest opportunity so that they can help you to access any support you may need
- The University and course teams are very welcoming and supportive but you need to be proactive when contact is made and access the opportunities which are offered



References and additional resources

French, A., Kempson, M. and Kendall, A. (2015) *Good Transitions: Lessons from the 'Transitions West Midlands' Project*. *Subscriber Research Series 2015-16*, Gloucester, QAA on-line at <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/f8f4/b34ebbbcb97d13b5d5cec3f44b3571fff7ff.pdf> (Accessed 3rd July 2019)

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[QAA Scotland Enhancement Theme 'Student Transitions' 2014-17](#)

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Yorke, M. and Longden, B. (2008) *The First Year Experience of Higher Education in the UK*. York: Higher Education Academy. Available from: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/fyefinalreport_0.pdf (Accessed 27 Nov 2017)

Other resources

This list of resources with links to 'video vignettes' on Uniview were recorded at the Share and Inspire event (June 2018) and Partner Staff Development Day (Sept 2018) and provide a brief overview of each approach.

Overview of Transitions Project and Findings - Video presentation by Dr Sue Cuthbert (Head of Collaborative Programmes), at Share and Inspire event (7 June 2018) on Uniview at: <https://uniview.worc.ac.uk/View.aspx?id=16207~5d~uPTFHlgALU>

Supporting the Learner Journey: see the Learner Journeys Toolkit at [Library Teaching Page and report by Dr Sarah Pittaway \(2017\) Student information and study skills: a learner journey from pre-entry to level 6 – what can we expect and how do we support students in completing the journey to independence?](#)

See video presentation by Clive Kennard (Academic Liaison Librarian - Health and Society) at Partner Staff Development Day (11 Sept 2018) on Uniview at <https://uniview.worc.ac.uk/View.aspx?id=17485~5m~eYAAXecwPg>

Study Buddy Groups - See video presentation by Denisse Levermore, Course Leader Yr 2 and Top-Up Child and Adolescent Mental Health at Share and Inspire event (7 June 2018) on Uniview at: <https://uniview.worc.ac.uk/View.aspx?id=17985~5r~Lx8ewrg6bK>

Summer Schools to support transition - See video presentation by Angela Hodgkins, Course Leader - BA (Hons) Integrated Working with Children and Families, HEA Senior Fellow at Share and Inspire event (7 June 2018) on Uniview at: <https://uniview.worc.ac.uk/View.aspx?id=16195~5j~BZGVS0vFwp>

SAMs - Student Academic Mentors - See video presentation by Jaime Guinan, Course Leader Sports Studies and Teaching Fellow in Sport Studies, Coaching & PE at Share and Inspire event (7 June 2018) on Uniview at: <https://uniview.worc.ac.uk/View.aspx?id=17986~5s~m8nQgqrrzM>

Using Social Networking and Facebook to Support Transition into Level 5 Nursing - See video presentation by Dave Robson, Senior Lecturer Mental Health at Share and Inspire event (7 June 2018) on Uniview at: <https://uniview.worc.ac.uk/View.aspx?id=16192~5g~7ONjMRONdv>

Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) – 'Blackboard and the Flipped Classroom' - See video presentation by Jo Augustus, Course Leader FdSc Mental Health at Partner Staff Development Day (11th Sept 2018) on Uniview at: <https://uniview.worc.ac.uk/View.aspx?id=17489~5q~jKJOMnVVEZ>

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