



Transition Skills and Strategies

Transition Models and How Students Experience Change

January 2023



Introduction

Project leader: Dr Ming Cheng, University of Glasgow (now University of Wolverhampton)
Project team members: Dr Gayle Pringle Barnes, Professor Christine Edwards,
Dr Manousos Valyrakis
Research assistants: Roxana Corduneanu, Marianna Koukou
Acknowledgement: Dr Rob Dekkers for guidance and advice in the content of this report

Transition can be understood as the internal process in the mind which takes place when students undergo change and pass from the familiar to the unknown, responding to cultural, social and cognitive challenges (Perry and Allard 2003, page 75, Prescott and Hellstén 2005, page 76). Change is something that happens to people, and they may or may not agree with it. Whereas change can happen quickly, making an effective transition when faced with change can often take longer.

Higher education can be viewed as consisting of multiple, concurrent transitions (Jindal-Snape 2010) both in context (such as a move to a new city, to a new educational system) as well as in interpersonal relationships (such as forming new relationships with students, peers, university support and academic staff as well as changes to existing relationships with family and school friends). Thus, transition is viewed as an ongoing process where levels of support should be adjusted accordingly (Jindal-Snape 2010).

The following report presents a summary of the environmental, financial, social and academic changes which occur during the transition 'into' and 'through' higher education as well as potential challenges which may be experienced. Thereafter, an overview of some of the current models of transition which exist in the literature are presented. These models were selected based on their relevance to student transitions in higher education. When considered together, these models are useful for understanding the numerous changes experienced by students during their transitions into and through higher education.

Changes and potential challenges experienced by students during transitions

During a transition, students experience similar feelings as to those in other life events, such as changing jobs, moving from one country to another or even losing a loved-one (Schaetti 1996). Although students experience the transition into higher education in different ways, for almost all of them, the change from a familiar environment into an unfamiliar one represents a period of disequilibrium (Jackson 2010, page 341). More specifically, the transition to university life involves changes and potential challenges that students may experience. Table 1 presents an overview of these changes. These should be addressed by higher education institutions to empower students to make smooth and successful transitions.

Table 1 Overview of changes and potential challenges students may experience as indicated in the published literature

External Changes	Potential Challenges	Strategies
Environment		
Location	Homesickness, depression, anxiety, isolation	Develop new supportive relationship
Cultural Shock	Fear of being ignored	Adjustment, adaptation
Financial		
Loan (family, friends or bank)	Stress, worry of future debt	Seek institutional support, monitor expenditure
Employment (part or full time)	Stress on establishing priorities, time commitments and responsibilities	Good time management
Social		
New friends	Anxiety	Be open and flexible
Academic staff	Isolation, feeling of not belonging here	Engage in classroom and institutional activities, and develop self-efficacy
Flatmates	Stressed, unsettled, unhappy	Consideration, communication and compromise
Academic		
Learning environment	Anxiety, confusion	Interact with peers through student societies and clubs, and institutional activities
Expectations	Disappointment, stress	Attend induction, self-management of expectations
Performance	Stress, anxiety	Develop self-efficacy, good time management, and develop academic and information literacy
Presentations and exams	Stress, anxiety, fear of getting embarrassed, lack of confidence	Develop communication and academic study skills, and develop self-efficacy and critical self-reflection

Models of student transition

This section outlines six models of transition. The majority of these describe the internal changes an individual goes through when his or her environment changes as a non-linear, disruptive and irregular process.

Bridges Transition Model (Bridges 2011)

Bridges (2011) Transition Model takes a general view of the change process and distinguishes three overlapping phases. People enter the first phase, 'Ending, Losing and Letting Go' when change is first presented to them and they experience emotions of fear, denial, anger, sadness, disorientation, frustration, uncertainty and a sense of loss. This phase could represent the first weeks of students in university when they go through external changes that are related to the new environment (different location and culture) as well as the experience of sharing a flat or living in a university accommodation with other students along with the shock of the new academic environment. These changes can make students experience feelings of homesickness, isolation, depression, anxiety, unhappiness and confusion (Denovan and Macaskill 2013; Ramachandran 2011; Thurber and Walton 2012).

The second phase, 'The Neutral (Transition) Zone' is where people are still attached to the old situation while they are trying to adapt to their new one. During this phase, individuals are often confused, impatient and uncertain as they experience skepticism, low productivity and anxiety about their role. Specific to student transitions, the external and internal changes during this phase can result in anxiety due to meeting new people; stress and anxiety regarding academic performance; fear of embarrassment over not being able to answer questions during presentations and stress and anxiety before, during and the days after an exam has taken place (Gu et al 2010; Wrench et al 2013; Yumatov et al 2001).

People are considered to have entered the third phase, 'The New Beginning' when they have started to embrace the change initiative and begin building the skills they need to work successfully in the new way. In other words, they experience openness to learning, high energy and a renewed commitment to their role. In terms of student transitions, this can be when students become more confident as they progress through university and adapt to the university learning routines. For example, they are more organised, prepared and have learned how to plan ahead. Bridges' Transition model, although developed for an organisational environment, could be considered relevant for describing student transitions.

U-Curve Theory of Adjustment (Risquez, Moore and Morley 2008)

Another model which may contribute to an understanding of the experiences students go through during their transitions to third level education is the U-Curve Theory of Adjustment (Risquez et al 2008). This model, which derives from the organisational literature (Oberg 1960), has more recently been adapted by Risquez et al (2008) where they describe three phases of 'Honeymoon', 'Culture Shock' and 'Adjustment' in student transitions.

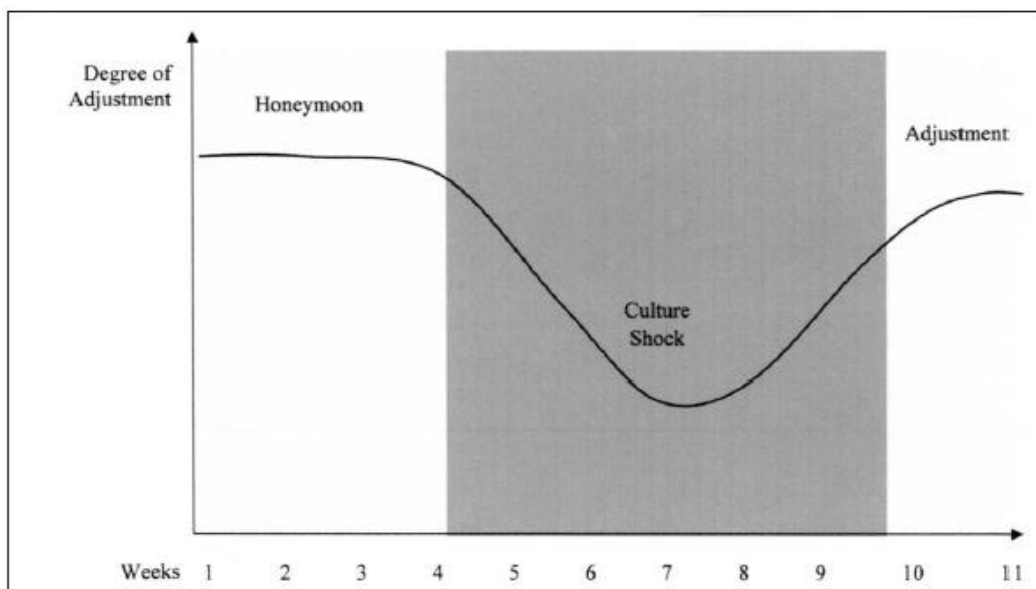
The first phase of the Honeymoon period is considered to be very short. In this stage, the majority of students who are about to enter university, envision a life with opportunities for personal, social and intellectual growth (Pancer et al 2000, page 38).

Following the Honeymoon phase, a period of Culture Shock follows, which is characterised by feelings of disillusionment and dejection. During this phase, the student may experience high levels of anxiety associated with academic demands, feelings of isolation and alienation, emptiness, stress, homesickness, sense of loss, detachment and even boredom. Students experience these emotions due to the changes in their environment (location and culture shock), their social life (meeting new people, sharing a flat, interact with academic staff) and academic and learning environment (Denovan and Macaskill 2013; Gu et al 2010; Thurber and Walton 2012; Wrench et al 2013).

The third phase is the Adjustment phase and is where the student begins to function effectively in the new environment. For example, they become more motivated, develop a sense of community with other students as well as develop new learning routines.

This model (see Figure 1) offers a useful framework to prepare students for the initial (academic, social and emotional in nature) shocks which they may face during the first year (in either undergraduate or postgraduate study) of their university life.

Figure 1 The U-Curve Theory of Adjustment (Risquez et al 2008)



Model of Student Adjustment (Menzies and Baron 2014)

The Model of Student Adjustment was developed by Menzies and Baron (2014) following their study on international student transitions. Their model is based on an earlier model by De Cieri et al (1991) and can be helpful in identifying what students may feel during different periods of transition.

The Student Adjustment Model divides the transition process into five phases of 'Pre-departure'; 'Honeymoon'; 'Party's Over' and 'Healthy Adjustment'. During the first phase of pre-departure, students are considered to be in a neutral mood. The honeymoon phase begins when the student has arrived at university with feelings of happiness and excitement. This phase is thought to last a number of weeks. Following this, the student enters the party's over phase when they begin to experience a number of shocks due to the new environment, such as social changes and changes related to the academic environment. During this phase, the student may become depressed, confused, isolated and experience

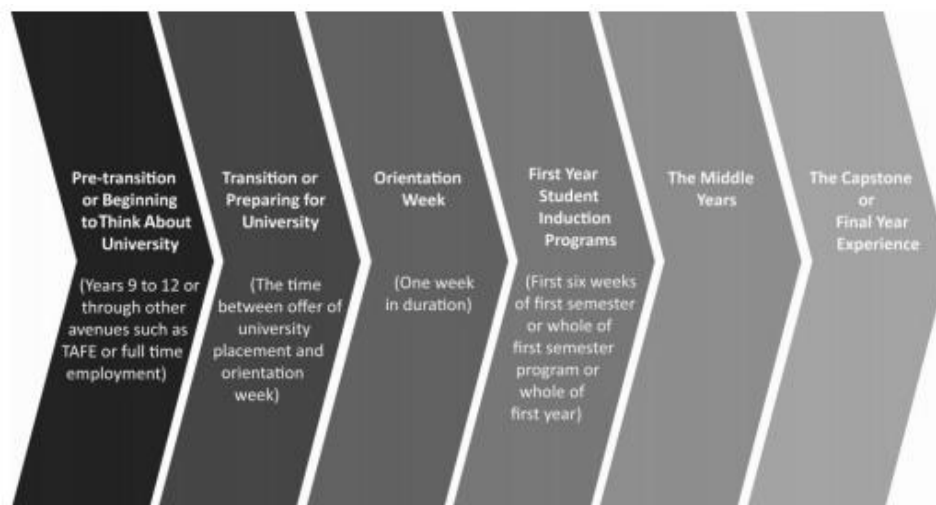
high levels of stress. Finally, once the student becomes more familiar with the environment and starts coping with the new studying demands as well as gets support from the university, the period of healthy adjustment begins, and thus mood levels return to neutral again.

Although this model lacks detail, it is very similar to the U-Curve Theory of Adjustment. The only significant difference between the two models is that the Student Adjustment Model also discusses the mood and emotions of students before they arrive at university. Hence, it may be viewed as an extension of the U-Curve Theory of Adjustment.

Student Experience Model (Burnett 2007)

The models mentioned thus far have focused only on the first weeks at university. Although the first weeks are of particular importance to successful transitions (Wilson et al 2014, page 3), it would be incorrect to state that the transition process begins or stops there. The Student Experience Model (see Figure 2) is an outcome of a study by Burnett (2007) and although this model focuses largely on the first year of students, it provides a more holistic view by viewing the transition process as a continuum of cohesive experiences that can occur throughout the university years from the first to the final year. This model identifies six phases of 'Pre-transition'; Transition; 'Orientation Week'; 'First Year Student Induction Programmes'; 'The Middle Years' and 'Capstone or Final Year Experience'.

Figure 2 The Student Experience Model (with a focus on first year experience)



In the initial phase of pre-transition, students begin to think about going to a university and their decision could be based on factors such as relevance for career planning, knowledge and familiarity of programmes, as well as university culture, family and work commitments and financial factors. In particular, if the financial situation is difficult for students, this increases the impact of strains associated while studying (Gu et al 2010, page 11; Hodgson and Simoni 1995). However, the concern of the student is not only focused on having sufficient financial resources but also who provides these and on what terms (Earwaker 1992, page 9). To counterbalance this, an increasing number of students take up part-time employment during their studies (Robotham and Julian 2006, page 111). Consequently, students (especially older ones with parental responsibilities) often have to negotiate with their families, employers, coworkers, and friends to establish priorities, time commitments, and responsibilities and therefore may not function well academically or psychologically (Polson 2003, page 63). Moreover, in most cases, students are not

sufficiently prepared to cope with the lack of familiarity at university and they can feel both academically and physically lost (Ellis, 2002, page 3). Similar to this notion, Denovan and Macaskill (2013, page 1011) suggest that some students have anticipatory beliefs regarding attending university and as such can experience disappointment and greater stress when the university does not meet their expectations. Students who have more accurate expectations seem to adjust better to the transition.

Second is the phase of transition, which is the period between having a firm offer of a university place and waiting for the upcoming orientation week. During this time, students usually have mixed feelings of excitement (due to receiving the offer) and fear (of the unknown as they have yet to have direct contact with the university).

When a student arrives on campus, they enter the orientation week, which includes a whole host of events focusing on social networking, academic skill development and specific programme information. During this phase, external changes related to the new environment as well as the new social life can make students experience emotions of homesickness, isolation, depression, fear of being ignored from the other students and feelings of not belonging in the new setting (Denovan and Macaskill 2013; Wrench et al 2013).

Following this, the student enters their first year induction programme, which can last from the first six weeks up to end of the first year. Students here experience a change in the academic environment compared to previous study at school or college. Hence, they may experience anxiety when adapting from a highly structured school system to a learning environment that requires an independent and autonomous approach to learning (Frame et al 2006, page 3). Presentations and exams can also be significant academic sources of stress. According to Yumatov et al (2001), students have strong psycho-emotional reactions where they experience feelings of stress and anxiety before, during and the days after following an exam. Moreover, students may be worried about speaking up in class discussions and may be afraid that not being able to answer questions will be embarrassing (Gu et al 2010, page 11). International students, in particular, may lack confidence and have limited exposure to group activities, presentation and other student-led initiatives due to choosing not to take part. This is despite international students possessing the subject-specific skills that are necessary to meet the academic demands of the programme. It is suggested that during this phase, continued support from senior levels of the university is crucial in order to prevent fragmentation of induction activities and ensure ongoing development and implementation of induction programmes.

The last two phases are the middle years followed by the final year. During the middle years of study, students may face specific issues and needs as there is usually a significant loss of well-structured and appropriate support. Burnett (2007) also suggests that the final year student experience is worthy of greater research, particularly in relation to mapping to institution specific graduate attributes and employment outcomes.

Rather than focusing only on student emotions, the Student Experience Model makes an attempt to map the different activities that should take place in each phase of transition as well as highlight areas that require a high level of communication between the university, feeder schools and potential university students.

Model for Mapping the Formation of Student Identity (Briggs, Clark and Hall 2012)

In a recent study, Briggs et al (2012) suggest that establishing a positive learner identity is essential to student achievement. To accomplish this, support is needed on both sides of the transition bridge (school and university) to enable students to adjust to the university

environment by developing learner identity and autonomy. Taking this into account, Briggs et al (2012) have developed a model that identifies and maps fundamental organisational influences - influences that are under the control of university administrators, academics and students' school contacts - that enable the growth of learner identity.

The concepts related to learner identity growth are seen to develop through the processes that a student goes through from the time he or she starts thinking about applying for a university place up to the time of completion of studies. Hence, first the student imagines and aspires to be a university student and goes about acquiring higher education-related skills and knowledge, which leads to a commitment in applying for a place and getting accepted to the university. When the student arrives at university, he or she adjusts to the academic environment where they develop higher education learning skills as well as gain confidence and autonomy and finally achieves success as a higher education learner.

The organisational influences that support transition and growth of learner identity are separated into school and university. While still in school, potential students benefit from access to: timely up-to-date information, encouragement and one-to-one support concerning university entry, activities that enable learning about higher education and advice and guidance through the application process. Students start to form expectations and can feel disappointment and great stress if the university does not later meet these expectations. On the other hand, students with more accurate expectations tend to have a better transition (Denovan and Macaskill 2013). Once the student goes to the university, the transition process is enhanced by an induction process, personal contact with peers and academic staff, formative feedback on progress and group activities, which enables learning and reinforces belonging.

However, it is important to note that some factors such as interaction with peers and academic staff, quality of information and chance of opportunities could all have negative influences on the transition process and learner growth. For example, students who have transitioned to university from a school environment (where teachers are available and approachable) may be confused and anxious as they realise that university learning is more complex and requires different learning routines - being organised, prepared and planning ahead (Wrench et al 2013, page 736; Morda et al 2007). The changes in the academic environment can lead to feelings of anxiety and stress when thinking about performing well academically as well as worry and lack of confidence when thinking about speaking up in class or presenting in front of peers (Frame et al 2006; Gu et al 2010). Moreover, international students may be baffled or confused by the jargon used by their peers, teachers and academic administrators (Ramachandran 2011, pp 204-207).

In summary, Briggs et al's (2012) study examined student transitions from a different perspective to that of the models outlined thus far. That is, they proposed that the development of positive learner identity is essential to effective student achievement. Moreover, this model indicates transition-related actions by the school as well as by the university which can enable each stage of the transition process.

Psychological Model of Student Retention (Bean and Eaton 2002)

Student's previous and future experiences and psychological qualities and attributes also play a critical role on successful social and academic integration to allow for successful transitions. Bean and Eaton (2002) have developed the 'Psychological Model of Student Retention' based on the notion that a student enters an institution with psychological attributes shaped by particular experiences, abilities and self-assessments.

Before entering the university environment, the most important psychological factors are an individual's self-efficacy assessments (level of confidence that they can perform well in the university environment), normative beliefs (opinions and advices of important people on enrolling in to a university course) and past behaviour (appropriate academic and social experiences to succeed in the university).

Once in the university environment, the student engages in a series of self-assessments and goes through several psychological processes. The change in the environment such as the social changes and the demands of the new academic environment can make students feel lost, disappointed, anxious, depressed, isolated and stressed. Hence, students need to go through several psychological processes with the most important of these being those of self-efficacy (strength of the student's belief that he or she will succeed on a task), coping behaviour (development of strategies to adapt to the new environment), and locus of control (the extent to which the students view their past outcomes and experiences to be caused by internal or external forces). As academic and social self-efficacy increases, coping strategies are developed and an internal locus of control is adopted. Thus, the student can now experience increased levels of confidence, high levels of motivation, internal attribution and experience situations to be less stressful.

This model links social and academic interaction by identifying individual psychological processes. It is suggested that increasing self-efficacy, internalising locus of control and increasing coping behaviors, are necessary psychological processes. Although this model was initially developed for student retention, it can be useful for exploring the psychological processes that can facilitate student transitions.

Conclusion

This report has examined a number of models in the literature which are useful for understanding student transitions. It is interesting to note that three of the models, Bridges' Transition Model, the U-Curve Theory of Adjustment and the Student Adjustment Model all make distinctions between similar phases (the ending of the 'old life', the shocks experienced by the differences in the 'new life' followed by periods of adjustment which sees a renewed sense of purpose). Moreover, the two models bar Bridges' one, identifies an addition pre-phase of happiness or alternatively 'neutrality of emotions' at the very start before the student begins to experience the negative emotions.

The Student Experience Model takes a student journey perspective and maps the different activities which take place in each phase of the transition into and through university. This model perhaps presents a more holistic view by considering the transition process as continuum of cohesive experiences which can occur throughout the university years. Similarly, Mapping the Formation of Student Identity focuses on the interaction that students have with their school and later with their university. This latter model suggests that the development of positive learner identity is essential to effective student achievement and transition.

The final model reviewed is the most distinct from the others since it focuses on the underlying psychological processes which may facilitate students' transitions as they go through the university experience. Psychological skills such as self-efficacy, locus of control and coping behaviours are all considered to be important in the Psychological Model of Student Retention.

It is clear that no one model can stand alone as a comprehensive description of the full array and complexity of transitions which takes place throughout the whole duration of university.

That is, from the moment a student decides to apply for a course of study, to entry and everything else that happens until alumni status.

In summary, the models in this report have examined student transitions from varying perspectives and as such they could be used as complementary to each other. The crucial point to remember is that since most of the models and research have focused on the challenges, barriers and problems to successful transitions, exploration of these issues can enable the development of positive strategies to enable student engagement and empowerment, not just in the first year but throughout.

References

- Bean, J & Eaton, S (2002) The Psychology Underlying Successful Retention Practices, *Journal of College Student Retention*, 3 (1), pp 73-89
- Bridges, W (2011) *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change [Kindle Edition]* Nicholas Brealey Publishing; 3rd Revised edition edition
- Briggs, A R J, Clark, J and Hall, I (2012) Building bridges: understanding student transition to university, *Quality in Higher Education*, 18 (1), pp 3-21
- Burnett, L (2007) Juggling First-Year Student Experience and Institutional Change: An Australian Example, *The 20th International Conference on First Year Experience*. Hawaii, pp 1-33
- Cieri, H D, Dowling, P J and F Taylor, K (1991) The psychological impact of expatriate relocation on partners. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 2 (3), pp 377-414
- Denovan, A and Macaskill, A (2013) An interpretative phenomenological analysis of stress and coping in first year undergraduates, *British Educational Research*, 39 (6), pp 1002-1024
- Earwaker, J (1992) *Helping and Supporting Students*. Open University Press.
- Ellis, N (2002) *The First Year Experience Project*. The University of Adelaide Learning and Teaching Development Unit
- Frame, P, Harwood, T, Hault, L, Jenkins, M, Lynch, K & Volpe, G (2006) Transitions into Higher Education : processes, outcomes and collaborations. In: *Proceedings of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors Aotearoa, Supporting Learning in the 21st Century*. Dunedin, New Zeland, pp 32-46
- Green, A (2006) University challenge: dynamic subject knowledge, teaching and transition. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 5 (3), pp 275-90
- Gu, Q, Schweisfurth, M and Day, C. (2010) *Learning and Personal Growth in a 'Foreign' Context: Intercultural Experiences of International Students*. Colchester, Essex
- Hodgson, C & Simoni, J (1995) Graduate Student Academic and Psychological Functioning, *Journal of College Student Development*, 36 (3), pp 244-253
- Jackson, C (2010) Transitions into Higher Education: Gendered implications for academic self-concept. *Oxford Review of Education*, 29 (3), pp 331-346
- Jindal-Snape, D (2010) *Educational transitions: Moving Stories from Around the World*, New York: Routledge
- Krause, K (2005) The changing face of the first year: Challenges for policy and practice in research-led universities. In: *Keynote paper at The University of Queensland First Year Experience Workshop*
- Menzies, J L and Baron, R (2014) International postgraduate student transition experiences: the importance of student societies and friends. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 51 (1), pp 84-94

- Morda, R, Sonn, C, Ali, L and Ohtsuka, K (2007) Using a student centred approach to explore issues affecting student transition, in *Enhancing Higher Education, Theory and Scholarship*. In: *Enhancing Higher Education, Theory and Scholarship, Proceedings of the 30th HERDSA Annual Conference*. Adelaide, page 390
- Oberg, K (1960) Cultural Shock : Adjustment to New Cultural Environments, *Practical Anthropology*, 7 (4), pp 177-182
- Pancer, S M, Hunsberger, B, Pratt, M W and Alisat, S (2000) Cognitive Complexity of Expectations and Adjustment to University in the First Year, *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 15 (1), pp 38-57
- Perry, C and Allard, A (2003) Making the connections: Transition experiences for first-year education students, *Journal of Educational Enquiry*, 4 (2), pp 74-89
- Polson, C J (2003) *Adult Graduate Students Challenge Institutions to Change*.
- Prescott, A and Hellstén, M (2005) Hanging together even with non-native speakers: The international student transition experience. In: *Internationalizing Higher Education*. Springer, pp 75-95
- Ramachandran, N T (2011) Enhancing international students' experiences: An imperative agenda for universities in the UK, *Journal of Research in International Education*, 10 (2), pp 201-220
- Risquez, A, Moore, S and Morley, M (2008) Welcome to college? Developing a richer understanding of the transition process for adult first year students using reflective written journals, *Journal of College Retention*, 9 (2), pp 183-204
- Robotham, D and Julian, C (2006) Stress and the higher education student : a critical review of the literature, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 30 (2), pp107-117
- Schaetti, B (1996) Transition programming in international schools: An emergent mandate. In: *Inter-Ed*. AAIE (Association for the Advancement of International Education)
- Thurber, C A and Walton, E A (2012) Experiences From the Field Homesickness and Adjustment in University Students, *Journal of American College Health*, 60 (5), pp1-5
- Wilson, K L, Murphy, K A, Pearson, A G, Wallace, B M , Reher, V G S and Buys, N (2014) Understanding the early transition needs of diverse commencing university students in a health faculty : informing effective intervention practices. *Studies in Higher Education*
- Wrench, A, Garrett, R and King, S (2013) Guessing where the goal posts are : managing health and well-being during the transition to university studies, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 16 (6), pp 730-746
- Yumatov, E A, Kuz'menko, V A, Badikov, V I, Glazachev, O S and Ivanova, L I (2001) Emotional Stress in Students during Examinations, *Human Physiology*, 27 (2), pp 221-227

Published by QAA, and produced by the sector and QAA Scotland, this resource has been commissioned by the Scottish Funding Council to support its duty to secure provision for assessing and enhancing the quality of fundable further and higher education provision.



Published - 9 January 2023

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2023
18 Bothwell Street, Glasgow G2 6NU
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786
Tel: 0141 572 3420
Website: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk