



Mind the Gap? The Transition of College Students to University

Collaborative Cluster Final Report

September 2023



Context and background

Mind the Gap? College Students' Experience of University, was one of several collaborative clusters funded by, and part of, the Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme (running from 2020 to 2023).

This collaborative cluster project took as its starting point the QAA Scotland's 2014-17 Enhancement Theme on [Student Transitions](#), with the intention of building on and updating work that had been done there on college-to-university transitions. Many of these projects looked at the experience of college students transitioning to university and found a mixed picture of student preparedness, confidence and attainment. It was felt that these studies largely presented a deficit model of the support required by college students moving to university and that this is problematical to the vision of a 'joined-up' tertiary sector.

As a cross-sector undertaking, this project sought to identify areas of crossover and disconnect between learning and teaching across college and university provision, and to generate ideas of how these may be more aligned. In two separate phases, the project considered the perceptions and experiences of students who had transitioned from college to university and then moved on to consider the views of college lecturers, university lecturers and student support staff.

This work is particularly pertinent at this point in time as Scotland's colleges and universities work together with QAA Scotland to support the Scottish Funding Council (SFC's) Tertiary Quality Project. In its 2021 review into the coherence and sustainability of the tertiary education sector in Scotland, SFC recommended, 'the development of a single framework for quality for colleges and universities, to uphold academic standards and secure enhancement of the learning experience of students' (SFC, 2021) and the sharing of good practice across tertiary education. More recently the 'Wither's report' (Scottish Government, 2023) argued that there should be 'a single post-school learning system within which skills and knowledge are developed through the learning experiences that take place throughout our lives' (p 5) facilitated by 'clear, coherent and recognisable learning pathways... with articulation between awards at different levels' (p 23). In June 2023, QAA Scotland was commissioned by the SFC to lead on the development of Scottish tertiary quality review and enhancement arrangements.

This bringing together of learning and teaching quality and enhancement activity across the college and university sectors was important in informing the cluster project. With 21% of Scottish-domiciled undergraduate university entrants coming from college routes (and 41% of SIMD 0-20 entrants to university entering via college study) (SFC, 2020), this project focused on the experience of a significant minority of the university student body. The project was conceived as a way of considering how teaching and learning is aligned between colleges and universities and what this means for the student experience of those transitioning between the two sectors. In doing so we hoped to identify to what extent a 'tertiary' model of learning and teaching actually exists and whether such a model is possible or desirable.

About the collaborative cluster

The collaborative cluster project team comprised:

- Dr Derek Robertson, Director of Student Experience, City of Glasgow College
- Dr Tom Cunningham, Senior Lecturer in Academic Development, Glasgow Caledonian University
- Professor Catriona Cunningham, Head of Department of Learning and Teaching Enhancement, Edinburgh Napier University

- Shaun Greenhorn, Student Intern, Glasgow Caledonian University
- Rachael Wilson, Student Intern, University of Glasgow.

Project work

The project work was split into two phases. First, two of the project group (Derek Robertson and Tom Cunningham) conducted a literature review of previously published papers on the experience of students transitioning from college to university in Scotland. Second, informed by the findings of Phase 1, two student interns (Shaun Greenhorn and Rachael Wilson), facilitated by the rest of the project team, conducted a series of focus groups with teaching and support staff in both colleges and universities.

Phase 1 - Literature review

The literature review identified 10 papers that dealt with the transition experience of students moving from college to university since 2012.

Findings

The themes that were generated from this review were:

- **Sectoral factors:** Students transitioning from college to university are challenged by a number of factors connected to the different conceptions and practices within the tertiary sector. These included a lack of alignment between the systems and purpose of the college and university sectors, with colleges traditionally being viewed as providers of 'vocational' education with an emphasis on skills development and universities focused on more academic 'higher' education. This disconnect has resulted in differences in course structure, academic conventions and teaching approaches. It is also recognised that college to university transitions are more prevalent and organised in 'post-1992' universities, leading to varying levels of integration within the sector.
- **Academic factors:** There can be a large divergence in learning and teaching practice between colleges and universities. College students tend to learn in smaller groups and to have a direct relationship with their lecturers, whereas university study is based on a model of more independent learning. This academic transition - with students having less contact time with academic staff, more responsibility for the management of their workload and having to negotiate different assessment conventions - is a significant challenge to student success. It is also the source of the 'deficit model' of college students transitioning to university, with the latter providing academic support programmes, such as summer schools or 'enhanced' transition workshops to familiarise incoming students with the academic expectations of the institution.
- **Identity and social factors:** Transitioning students, particularly those entering the later years of a degree programme through advanced standing or articulation routes, often face challenges around becoming acculturated to the practices of the new institution, making social connections and developing a sense of belonging. This can be particularly challenging given the diversity of college students, who may be disproportionately juggling study with work and family life.
- **Logistical factors:** More short-term challenges to the student experience can be logistical factors - such as becoming familiar with the physical environment, procedures and IT systems of the new institution. In addition, new, and perhaps increased, travel requirements, particularly to universities that are at a distance from the original college, can be difficult for students with time and financial challenges.

These themes led us to pose three challenging questions for future developments in this area: (1) Where does the responsibility for enabling effective transition between college and university lie? (2) To what extent is alignment between colleges and universities possible or desirable? (3) Does the current conception of the college-to-university transition genuinely widen participation?

The complete review was published in the [International Journal of Educational and Life Transitions](#) and is available open source (Robertson & Cunningham, 2023).

Phase 2 - Focus group work

Having used the literature review to identify the challenges faced by students transitioning from college to university (an area that was also covered in a strand of the QAA Scotland Enhancement Theme of 2014-17), it was felt that the staff perspective was less studied and so should form the basis of the second phase of this project.

To facilitate this work, the project employed two student interns, both of whom were current undergraduate university students but who had entered university via the college route. It was felt that this perspective would give them personal insights into the gathering and analysis of the data collected.

Data collection took the form of focus groups and individual interviews. The focus groups took the form of semi-structured conversations; while these used the themes generated in the literature review as a starting point, they were allowed to develop into free-flowing conversations. Importantly, in order to seek cross-sector views and to facilitate the sharing of perspectives, the focus groups were organised to bring together college and university lecturers in the same groups.

We conducted four focus groups with a total of 12 participants (three university academic staff, five university student support staff, four college academic staff) from three institutions (two universities and one college). The focus groups took place in February and March 2023.

The focus groups were facilitated by the staff members of the project team but were intended to be student-led.

Participants

All participants had a role in supporting the student transition from college to university. On the university side they included academic staff who work on programmes with pathways, through articulation or advanced standing, for students into the later years of the programme. In addition, the university participants included academic support staff who work with university faculties and schools to develop and provide support for transitioning students. On the college side, the academic staff involved all work on programmes where the exit pathway for a significant number of students is advanced entry to university course.

Findings

Initial analysis of the focus group data was performed by the two student interns. As well as generating themes from this data, the students have given useful insights into how they have been present in their own experiences. Their findings are presented more fully in a [separate report](#) and so are only briefly summarised here.

For the purposes of this report, the themes presented by the students' report can be considered as falling into largely similar areas as those outlined in the literature review developed in Phase 1:

- **Sectoral:**
 - differences in staff/student relationship
 - cultural perceptions of college and university
- **Academic:**
 - independent learning
 - academic writing
- **Identity and social:**
 - student confidence
- **Logistical:**
 - signposting of resources and support at both college and university
 - mandatory student support.

These themes are developed more fully in the student report and it is the intention of the project team to perform a further qualitative analysis on the focus group data for publication in a special issue of the *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice* on 'Exploring the Tertiary Landscape' in early 2024 (subject to acceptance).

Dissemination

In addition to the two reports presented here, the work and findings of this project have been shared and discussed at the following events:

- City of Glasgow College Learning and Teaching Conference, March 2023
- Scottish Higher Education Developers, Tertiary Partnerships: Transitions from College to University, Queen Margaret University, May 2023
- QAA Scotland's 5th International Enhancement Conference, Glasgow Caledonian University, June 2023
- QAA Scotland's 'The future of learning and teaching: Planning and delivery of digitally enhanced blended learning' event, Glasgow, September 2023.

In addition, the findings of Phase 1 of the project have been published in the *International Journal of Educational and Life Transitions* (Robertson & Cunningham, 2023) and the project team is developing a paper based on the findings of Phase 2.

Evaluation

In evaluating the project we have reflected on how the original project aims have been fulfilled or have changed as the project has progressed.

The original project proposal sought to consider three main areas, which are summarised with commentary on the next page. Throughout the project, but particularly in the production of the literature review and in the analysis of focus group data, the project team have reflected on these points and considered how they have developed as our thinking has progressed.

- 1 [The project] will consider whether the expressed difference between the student experience of college and university learning and teaching is accurate and, if so, what changes can be made across the sector to support student success.**

The project has confirmed the differences in learning and teaching experienced by college students transitioning to university. It has also confirmed that this is a major source of the 'deficit model' of the perceived shortcomings of college students that require to be remediated by universities upon these students joining an existing cohort. However, the project has also considered that, given the diverse nature of the college student body, their varying educational experiences and the differing outcomes that these students can achieve, whether differences in the teaching models across the sector are justifiable and whether it is realistic or desirable to move towards a unified tertiary model. In both college and universities, a more nuanced and flexible approach which recognises learner differences may support student transitions more effectively but would be difficult to reproduce at scale.

- 2 The project will consider the perceptions and experiences of learning, teaching and assessment of college lecturers, university lecturers, student support staff, current college students, and students who have transitioned from college to university - to identify areas of crossover and disconnect between the two sectors and how transitioning students might negotiate and manage these.**

Both phases of the project allowed student and staff experience to be shared. To some extent, as illustrated by the literature review, the student experience has been more widely considered previously, but this is the first project that the project team is aware of that has brought together college and university educators, and support staff to consider the transition experience. The personal perspective that the student interns were able to bring to their analysis of these conversations is valuable, but the project team feel that a more systematic and academic analysis of the focus group data would be useful and will continue to work on this.

- 3 The aim of the project is to gain understanding of student and staff experiences of learning and teaching and the outcomes are intended to support staff across the sector in identifying unifying approaches to practice in both colleges and universities to support students making the transition.**

As noted above, the extent to which 'unifying' approaches are possible or valuable has been questioned during the analysis of data gathered for this project. One of the questions that has been raised (and is suggested for further consideration below) is how, in recognition of the diversity of the tertiary sector, we support differences in practice across the sector while working within a single quality framework.

Recommendations for future work

As can be seen from the above, the outcomes of both Phase 1 and Phase 2 of this project raise a number of questions for future consideration:

- How do we preserve and recognise the diversity of effective practice within the tertiary sector while developing a single quality framework?
- Is it possible to streamline learner journeys (for example, remove requirements to repeat courses at previously achieved SCQF levels)? What does the data tell us about this? What would the challenges be?
- Is it possible to embed articulation more widely beyond the 'post-1992' universities to genuinely widen access? What are the challenges here?
- Will a 'joined-up' tertiary sector remove the cultural barriers within the sector and lead to greater parity of esteem between college and university education?
- What are the implications of a tertiary quality model for staff development? For example, is it desirable to integrate Teaching Qualification for Further Education and Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice provision or to align the Professional Standards for Lecturers in Scotland's Colleges with Advance HE's UK Professional Standards Framework?

References

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