

## **Transition and the student experience: measuring what matters (1-5-1-W004-Mayne)**

### **Abstract**

This paper is comprised of two important themes-student transition, and student satisfaction.

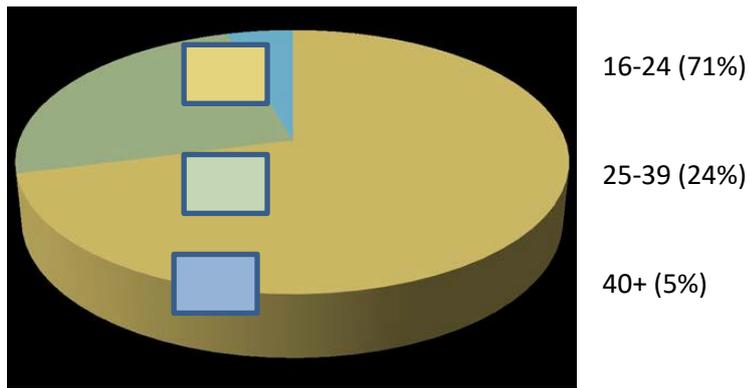
For many years, nurse education has attempted to respond to the national driver of widening participation and widening access and a national agenda that supports a need to offer flexible student journeys, while at the same time meeting the demands of employers and key stakeholders. Learning Journeys (Higher Education Academy, 2013) reports findings that students entering year two of a programme are most likely to find settling into university challenging, therefore this paper details a staged model of transitional support designed to support students in their personal and professional development throughout academic and practice learning milestones. Using an action research approach, the paper will explore the experiences of four student nurse cohorts, the first of which have recently graduated.

Theories of student satisfaction have traditionally focused mainly on students' perceptions of the educational environment rather than their perceptions of learning (Walker et al, 2016). It is clear that students who experience a valued learning journey are satisfied with their learning (Huybers et al, 2015). Student satisfaction with learning is unique to the individual, changes over time and maybe transient or sustained, mild or intense (Smith et al 2018).

Student satisfaction is a major policy driver in higher education in many Western countries including the United Kingdom, United States of America and Australia, and will therefore be considered within this presentation today.

### **Introduction**

This paper details a longitudinal study conducted over the last five years in a Scottish university. The students in the study are articulation students entering year two of a nursing undergraduate programme. The study is set against a backdrop of the Scottish White Paper in 2011 entitled 'Putting Learners at the Centre'. This focused upon providing efficient, flexible learner journeys from FE to HE, creating articulation routes without repetition of learning. Other desirable outcomes included currency of curricula across both sectors, removing barriers to transition, widening access to post-16 learning and promoting collaboration, partnerships and interconnectedness within provision of FE and HE.



**Figure One: Articulation student Numbers Scotland 2013-14** (most recent data)

The above chart provides a breakdown by age band for all articulating students in Scotland in 2013-14. The largest proportion of those, 2,748 students, are in the 16-24 age band, which is equivalent to 71% of all articulating students. This is both the highest percentage and number of students in this age band since 2008-09. The smallest proportion is for the 40+ age band, with only 175 students (5% of all articulating students). The middle age band of 25-39 is just under 1,000 students and sits at 24% of the overall articulation activity. This is the same as in 2008-09 but lower than 2012-13, when they accounted for 27% of activity.

However, it is not surprising that it is the 16-24 age band who are most prevalent as articulating students, as this age band also makes up the largest number of HN leavers from colleges. For learners over the age of 25, whilst they made up 35% of overall articulation activity in universities in 2013-14, they were only 31% of HN qualifiers from colleges in the preceding academic year (2012-13). This means that articulation enabled a higher percentage of adult learners through to degree than actually qualified in the previous year, which suggests some were returning to HE after a gap in their studies. This is just one demonstration of how articulation journeys are not linear paths from college to university but are also used by learners to re-enter higher education.

### **The National Student Survey**

The annual National Student Survey (NSS), introduced in the UK in 2005, was intended to be a method by which universities could assess their own teaching quality and seek to improve student satisfaction with their courses. The NSS has become one of the major instruments by which universities seek to compete in the market for student recruitment by sending a signal of teaching quality. Furthermore, these scores are used to rank student satisfaction across universities, and feed into the major university league tables. Currently, universities are interested in possible strategies by which they may maximise their NSS scores and attract more able students.

Lenton shows that the traditional universities receive a more favourable score in the NSS than the modern universities, possibly due to better quality teaching, more research-led teaching or because the students are aware of the importance of protecting the university reputation. The NSS is often used as a policy tool to enhance the student experience, and as a tool to rank HEIs. It is criticised both philosophically and operationally (Bell and Brooks, 2017)- mostly for not addressing 2 questions:

whether students themselves are in the best position to evaluate the quality of their education, and secondly whether this evaluation should be done while students are still studying

### **Predictors of attrition**

While predictors of attrition may be linked to student satisfaction there may be more to be discovered looking at indicators of student persistence, and subsequent completion (Holder, 2007). Economic, organisational, psychological and societal influences have been identified in the research literature as key factors in student withdrawal from their undergraduate programme of study (Nora et al., 1996; Ramos et al., 2015). Mature students add complexity to student satisfaction. Failure to integrate into the university system, and adult learning theories are two areas that have received attention in the literature in an attempt to explain high levels of attrition among this cohort (Kenner and Weinerman, 2011; Park and Choi, 2009). The growth of online education in universities has resulted in an increase in enrolment but little attention has been placed on retaining students studying online (Gazza and Hunker, 2014).

Personal commitment and good support networks are critical elements of positive student experiences and retention (Cameron et al., 2011; Braine and Parnell, 2011). Peer support is particularly identified as influential (Gerrard and Billington, 2014; Crombie et al., 2013; Fontaine, 2014), together with personal emotional resilience (Beauvais et al., 2014; Jones-Schenk and Harper, 2014; Williamson et al., 2013; Thomas et al., 2012).

Strategies that aim to improve student nurses' experiences need to consider the student lifecycle from recruitment to graduation, to set reasonable student expectations and ensure that a career within nursing is both desired and valued (Fontaine, 2014).

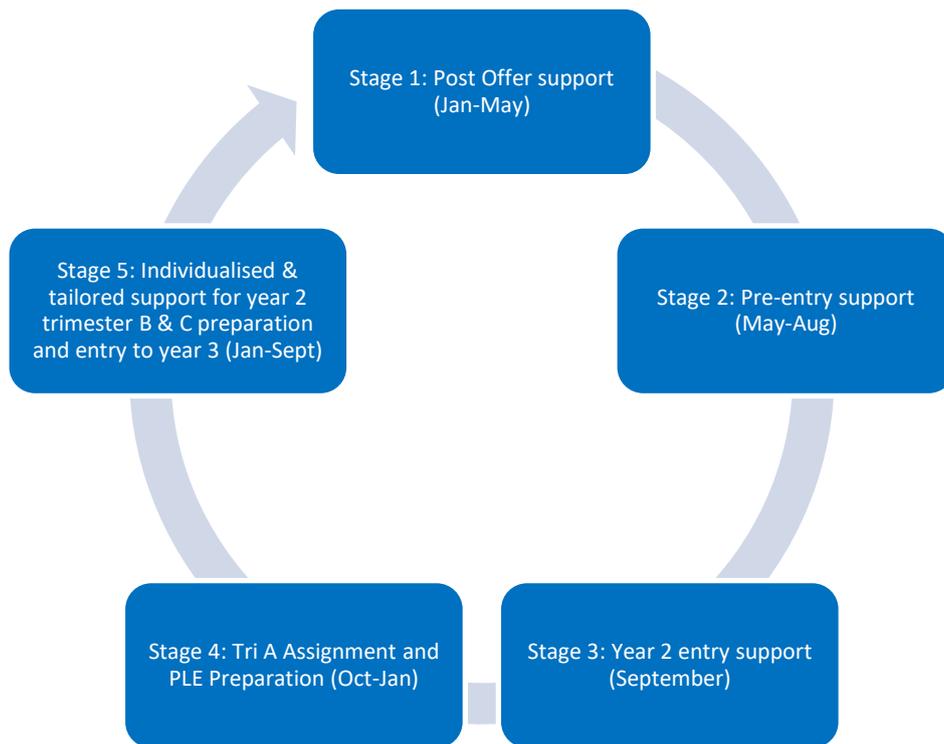
This student demographic is important when considering the question "What really matters?" therefore this paper will demonstrate how four student cohorts, entering year 2 of a nursing programme answer that question. In 2012 three local colleges formed a community of practice with the HEI to create an articulation pathway. The cohort (cohort 1) comprised 12 adult field students who entered year two of the programme. Support was put into place, aiming to provide a smooth transition. Feedback from these students included issues associated with transition and acclimatisation, transitioning into an existing cohort, professional identity & feelings of belonging, clinical Readiness for advanced entry coupled with learner shock in the clinical context, fear over teaching & learning strategies and anxiety, confidence and feelings of "*am I good enough to be here?*" and "*sneaking in the back door to nursing*". A Pilot study indicated that not enough support in pre-entry stage was available, therefore interventions within the model were aimed at improving post offer and pre-entry support strategies. The outcome of this action research project is the creation and evaluation of a model of support known as SMOCTS. As a result, we received support to undertake a two- year project which aimed to meet the following objectives:

- To use an action research approach to investigate students' views of the transition journey from college to university when entering at advanced standing.
- To evaluate the efficacy of support provided to articulating students by the School before, during and after transition.
- To measure student success within the theory and practice components of the programme
- To provide data and feedback for college partners to support and improve articulation pathways.

- To measure the success of the online learning community
- To explore student preparedness for practice learning

## **Methodology**

The principles and theory of action research underpin the project and inform the research design. As distinct from more positivist methods of enquiry, action research is cyclical and reflective. Participants examine their own practice within context with the aim of improving its effectiveness and justice (Cohen et al., 2007). As a method it has been usefully applied to both the research and subsequent improvement of higher education learning and teaching. It is appropriate for this project because the emphasis is on action, both within the present, and also within the future. (Parahoo,2006). A mixed method approach, though primarily qualitative in nature, allows for the widest possible collection of relevant data and the greatest scope to iteratively develop further cycles of research. A quantitative approach will be used to measure student success, examining student results and practice assessment documents.



**Figure Two: A Staged Model of Collaborative Transitional Support**

The SMOCTS approach is enhanced through direct support from a small but dynamic core articulation team. The articulation team and the staged model of collaborative transitional support is further enhanced by our strong links with, wider services at GCU including the Learning & Development Centre and College Connect. Our partnerships and collaborative working with colleges, individual FE tutors and NHS clinical partners further strengthen and enhance your transitional journey to year 2.

### Findings

Qualitative data received from the student cohorts revealed that the following strategies evaluated positively:

- Teaching, Learning & Support Strategies
- Virtual Learning Community (VLC)
- Year 2 boot-camp (lectures, tutorials, skills labs and directed study materials)
- Student preparatory/professional workshops
- Articulation specific induction & orientation programme
- Field Specific Academic Advisor
- Collaborative/partnership working

## **Discussion**

Satisfaction with higher education usually focuses on the students' perceptions of the educational environment rather than their perceived learning. Svanum and Aigner (2011) suggest that it is well established that course grades influence student satisfaction, and Debate exists whether module evaluations, in any format, are useful in measuring student satisfaction. Marsh and Roche (2000) argue that eliciting student opinions about university teaching is useful and valid in relation to teaching quality. Huybers states that these evaluations measure teaching quality, or 'good teaching', but it is not clear what actually constitutes teaching effectiveness, and whether these elements can be assessed by students. Furthermore, Leetcher and Neves (2010) found that the quality of subject specific teaching had little or no effect on student satisfaction. Other factors such as self-confidence, extra-curricular activities, careers and general teaching quality had greater impact.

### **Why do students stay?**

In the UK, a review of the literature exploring the retention of nursing students in undergraduate programmes, was conducted by Cameron et al. (2011). They concluded that nursing students ability to remain on the programme was often explained by programme and personal issues including professional issues, support, student characteristics and family (Cameron et al., 2011). Emanuel and Pryce-Miller, 2013 explain that nursing students are expected to understand a quite complicated and demanding curriculum, while at the same time completing the minimum number of placement hours specified by the NMC. The study also found that unrealistic expectations and dissatisfaction with clinical placement learning can accelerate students' decisions to leave. Other writers in this area, (Crombie et al., 2013; Hamshire et al., 2011), write that a supportive and positive relationship with mentors whilst undertaking clinical placements is vital.

The satisfaction, retention and attrition of mature age students has been studied by Kenner and Weinerman, 2011; and Park and Choi, 2009). These studies demonstrate that a failure to integrate into the university system, and difficulty with studying, are often cited as an explanation of high levels of attrition among this cohort (Kenner and Weinerman, 2011; Park and Choi, 2009). Nichols and Dewerse's study shows that students' attrition is affected by internal factors (self-factors), course factors, and support services provided.

Walker et al (2016) write that much is written in the nursing literature about the need for learning opportunities to meet student expectations. In addition, there has been a great deal written about attrition and the reasons why nursing students leave their programme of study. Yet few studies have concentrated on identifying nursing students' satisfaction (Walker et al, 2016).



**Figure Three: Indicators of student nurse satisfaction with their educational experience**

This integrative review investigated student nurse satisfaction with their learner journey, the themes that emerged are included below:

1. Authentic learning
2. Motivation
3. Resilience
4. Support
5. Collaborative learning

Authentic learning was found to be a key factor in students' satisfaction with their learning journey. This theme related to students being engaged in their learning. Similarly, Kenny et al found that students in the study valued support from academic staff, personal tutors, and small group teaching sessions as important to their sense of belonging. The literature shows that HEIs need to be aware of this, and create supportive environments that promote a sense of belonging (Williamson et al., 2013). Unmet expectations and a perceived lack of support can have a negative effect on students' satisfaction and decision to continue on a programme (McKendry et al., 2014; Wright and Wray, 2012; Hamshire et al., 2013; O'Donnell, 2011) and students cite the 'wrong career choice' as a reason for wishing to leave their programme.

### **Conclusion**

The importance of the two key themes-student transition and student satisfaction have been discussed. The action research study has shown the areas that matter to student nurses, and the discussion of relating literature, together with responses from the students themselves has shown the following statement from Walker et al (2016) to be very true:

*“nursing students encounter many ‘bumps’, ‘stops’ and ‘stressors’ during their learning journey to becoming registered nurses. Therefore, in order for this group of students to achieve it is up to those guiding the educational experience to do their utmost to ensure the learning journey is as inclusive and supportive as possible with consideration given to each student's unique and individual needs.”*

