Emerging perspectives of transition within an articulation pathway: A study of the student experience

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ABSTRACT: For many years nurse education has attempted to respond to the national driver of widening participation and widening access. Policy in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2011) is calling for efficient, flexible learner journeys from Further Education to Higher Education offering articulation without repetition of learning. The national agenda 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.

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, providing longitudinal academic skills, and tracking and evaluating progress. Using an action research approach, the paper will explore the experiences of three student nurse cohorts, the first of which have recently graduated.

1 Introduction

This paper explores the student experience of articulation into year two of a pre-registration undergraduate nursing programme, focusing upon the implications and effectiveness of a staged model of transitional support. The project is underpinned by the mission and vision of the host Higher Education Institution (HEI) for delivering access and excellence in the development of a flexible articulation pathway for students from partner colleges within Glasgow and beyond. It is an example of responding to the changing landscape, exploring how workforce planning within the National Health Service (NHS). The Scottish university in the study has a clear strategic goal is to increase opportunities for widening access and enhance curriculum flexibility, and to build on partnerships with schools and colleges. 18% of entrants articulate from 25 of Scotland’s Colleges, and in 2013/4 applications for articulation with full advanced standing for Higher National Certificate (HNC) into level 2, and for Higher National Diploma (HND) into level 3, has increased by 35.5%. In 2013/4 the number of applications being received for full advanced standing articulation has increased to 48.9% of the total applications received by the university.

2 Background

2.1 Literature review
The under representation of some groups, particularly students with non-traditional qualifications, within post compulsory education is well documented, and for some time a
variety of models have been available to support the articulation of under-represented groups into higher education. The articulation of students from Scotland’s Colleges into higher education is central to the government agenda of widening participation (Knox, 2005). Many studies within the literature refer to the seminal work of Tinto (1997) and Yorke and Longden (2007), exploring the first year experience and the effect of transition upon retention and attrition, indeed transition has commonly related to the move into year one of university (Maunder et al., 2012) rather than at other stages of the student journey. This may be because this is a time of great change for students in many areas of their life. Cree et al. (2009) write that students find the transition from further education to higher education to be daunting, reporting ‘learner shock’ on entering university, this may be due to stressors including financial worries, lack of support, family issues, and academic difficulties, such as essay writing, study skills and time management. However, it is important to realise that this may be particularly challenging for students entering the second year of a degree programme (Higher Education Academy, 2013). In one of the few studies conducted with this student profile, Baron and D’Annunzio-Green (2009) argue that this group have different needs and expectations from other student cohorts, reporting a high level of motivation and a corresponding low level of self-confidence. Pike and Harrison (2011) agree, outlining the experiences of learners entering an Honours degree having completed a Foundation degree. These students are often required to negotiate a new and different academic culture, accompanied by a dissonance between expectation and reality. Furthermore, many students within this demographic profile are often employed part-time to support their studies, and this can present an extra burden for students (Jogaratnam and Buchanan, 2004; Manthei and Gilmore, 2005).

Teaching and learning needs are an important element of transition. There is evidence to suggest that mature students are more likely to be self-directed in their learning than younger students (Andrews et al., 2005; O’Shea, 2003; Smedley, 2007). Although Cree et al. (2009) found that students from further education were more able to work in groups with their peers because they have been exposed to this teaching and learning style in their previous studies, it is also worth noting that the ability to take responsibility for one’s own learning is not natural or universal to all students (Timmins, 2008).

2.2 National drivers
The health care context in 21st Century in Scotland continues to evolve to meet the demands of the population to maintain and improve high quality, safe, effective and patient centred care. Against this backdrop the newly approved pre-registration nursing programme was developed to equip student nurses with the necessary critical thinking and practice competencies to meet the professional requirements of the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), as well as developing the attributes expected of a graduate.

Within the realms of workforce planning Scottish Government policy highlighted the need for a workforce able to meet the present and future healthcare needs through robust training and educational programme delivery (Scottish Government, 2009). In response to the challenges identified within workforce planning by a local NHS Board, formation of a strategic educational partnership identified the potential for new and innovative training and educational provision to meet both the national policy drivers and local workforce plans for Health Care Support Workers. At the same time the Scottish Government declared their vision for the post-16 education sector, which included delivering the best outcomes for learners and maximising contribution to sustainable economic growth for Scotland. The White Paper, Putting Learners at the Centre (Scottish Government, 2011), required stakeholders to respond to local circumstances and sectoral needs to facilitate articulation from college to university without repetition of level, to simplify processes, and to streamline bureaucracy.

A tripartite partnership was formed between workforce planning within the NHS, an HEI, and three further education (FE) Colleges working to create a pathway to facilitate flexible
articulation for students from the HNC to year two of the pre-registration nursing programme. The initiative was supported by Greater Glasgow Articulation Partnership (GGAP), one of six regional articulation hubs with a remit to strengthen and enhance articulation between colleges and HEIs. A new HNC in Care and Administrative Practice was thus developed to address the changing skills’ mix of the NHS in Scotland, providing an academic pathway to prepare students for future roles within the NHS and public service provision. Comprehensive curriculum mapping was conducted by staff representing both sectors to design a flexible pathway which recognized the prior learning gained by students completing a higher national qualification. The FE curriculum was mapped against the Healthcare Quality Strategy for NHS Scotland (Scottish Government, 2010), the HEI framework for inter-professional education, and also the practice learning experience of nursing students studying on year one of the pre-registration degree.

3 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.

3.1 Project 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.

3.2 Cohorts within the Study

Since its introduction in 2012, the articulation pathway to pre-registration nursing has grown in accordance to the HEI agreed articulation target numbers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>Intake</th>
<th>Partner colleges</th>
<th>Conditional offers</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>Adult</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2015</td>
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Table 1 Students cohorts on articulation pathway 2012-2015
The proposed study consists of data collection from these four student cohorts at several phases of their learning journey:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>Data Collection Points</th>
<th>6mths after Exit</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (entry 2012)</td>
<td>At point of programme exit Sept 2014</td>
<td>Feb 2015</td>
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<td>2 (entry 2013)</td>
<td>Commencing yr 3 Sept 14</td>
<td>Mid-point yr 3 Feb 15</td>
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<td></td>
<td>At point of programme exit Sept 2015</td>
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<td>6mths after exit Feb 2016</td>
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<td>3 (entry 2014)</td>
<td>Commencing yr 2 Sept 14</td>
<td>Mid-point yr 2 Feb 15</td>
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<td>Commencing yr 3 Sept 15</td>
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<td>At point of programme exit Sept 2016</td>
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<td>4 (entry 2015)</td>
<td>At point of selection onto pathway Feb 15</td>
<td>Commencing yr 2 Sept 15</td>
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<td>Mid-point yr 2 Feb 16</td>
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<td>Commencing yr 3 Sept 16</td>
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Table 2 Data collection points from student cohorts

Data collection for the project included semi-structured focus groups to investigate initial views on transition, support strategies, practice learning and teaching, learning and assessment. Examination of students’ academic performance through scrutiny of assessment data and practice learning assessment documents provided a quantitative analysis of student progression.

4 Data Collection

Qualitative and quantitative data was gained from articulation pathway students through the use of semi-structured focus group interviews, questionnaires and scrutiny of assessment data. This enabled the researchers to cover pertinent areas related to transitional experiences and support strategies whilst permitting the participants’ freedom of response and description to illustrate concepts (Morse & Field, 1995). Secondly, the semi-structured approach was well suited for the exploration of perceptions, feelings and opinions of participants. Lastly the varied professional and work life histories of the cohort sample groups aligned well with the use of a standardised interview schedule.

Quantitative data was also obtained via a range of questionnaires which included practice learning evaluations and student evaluations of implemented learning, teaching and support strategies within the articulation pathway. The examination of students’ academic performance through the scrutiny of assessment data, coupled with a cross comparison of academic performance and module grades with two other randomly selected student groups enabled further quantitative data to be obtained.

5 Data Analysis

Data analysis took place in three distinct phases for each cohort sample group. Phase one was primarily focussed on analysing data from the various questionnaires in order to establish and refine themes and concepts for the interview stages of the project. Phase two focussed on thematic analysis of data from the various interviews conducted with each sample group during the phases highlighted in Table 2. This was achieved through rigorous thematic coding of transcribed interview data. Phase 3 consisted of scrutiny, documentary analysis and cross comparison of student assessment data. Student retention and
progression statistics were also considered in conjunction with the qualitative and quantitative data obtained in phase one and phase two of the project.

6 Findings
Analysis of cohort data highlighted a broad range of concepts relating to transitional experiences and transitional support. The data suggests that there are many similar issues in this student group when compared with first year nursing students, including themes such as “fear and apprehension over different teaching and learning strategies”, “campus orientation”, “engagement with and use of IT/Software systems”, “academic writing and referencing”, “literature searching and literature reviewing”. However, the purpose of this study is to explore the experience specific to a cohort of students entering year two of a degree programme.

6.1 Transitioning into an existing cohort
Our findings support other studies within the literature (Baron and D’Annunzio-Green, 2009), indicating that for most participants the concept of transitioning into an existing university cohort again provoked “feelings of anxiety and apprehension”. This is a time of great change for students, for some discomfort was alleviated by being placed in a tutorial group with a large number of fellow articulation students. Participants reported that this helped consolidate a “sense of familiarity”, “feelings of all being in the same boat” and “not feeling as isolated at university”. For others, this was viewed as a negative strategy as it was felt to “reduce peer group support from existing nursing students” and in some instances was felt to “hinder the integration” and “inclusion” aspects of transition and advanced entry.

6.2 Professional Identity and Feelings of belonging
Within the study, participants expressed “confusion over their professional identity” and frequently reported feelings of “not always being sure who they belonged to” within the educational partnership. There is considerable literature relating to role transition within the student nurse learning experience (Holland, 1999; Ousey, 2009), and this theme emerged within responses, participants reported feelings of trying to “juggle a number of roles”, and often a triad of complex roles (FE student, HE student and in some cases NHS employees) as both “challenging” but “rewarding”. Furthermore, Hinsliff-Smith (2011) discusses the tension that often accompanies student nurses as parents with a dual role as student. Underpinning this role confusion is a desire to be accepted by the team, the concept of belongingness has dominated literature related to the student experience over the last twenty years, (Levett-Jones et al., 2007) and is closely related to the theme of fitting, of feeling part of the team. For some participants there was a sense of “diminished identity” and a “lack of understanding of the role and status of an articulation student”. In the early stages of transition into year 2 of the programme participants described feelings of “am I good enough to be here?”, compounded by what was described as “awkward newness and unfamiliarity” and feelings of “sneaking in the back door to nursing”. The literature acknowledges that a sense of belonging and a need to develop professional identity is particularly important at the beginning of their student journey (Andrew, 2009), in university, and importantly, within the practice learning environment (Andrew, 2011).

These feelings and perceptions of “not belonging” and “newness & unfamiliarity” were seen as diminishing considerably as participants progressed in their programme. Increased clinical confidence and clarity over student role/status were perceived as facilitating factors in clinical learning. Participants reported that “knowing I was a proper student nurse at university helped make me believe in myself”. Further indications were “Mentors knew you were a nursing student, just like everybody else in the program, this helped me feel like a real student nurse. I was very proud”. Clinical confidence and performance were also seen as increasing in conjunction with advancement and progression on the program. “As I progressed on the program, I didn’t worry so much about where I had come from or how I
had got here……..I just felt confident and happy in my clinical performances and my ability to support my patients”.

6.3 Clinical readiness for advanced entry
Participants also reported, albeit in smaller numbers, that they felt overwhelmed and less prepared than they had first anticipated when faced with their first year 2 practice learning experience. Leducz et al (2012) make the point that very little is written about transition through placement learning. However, the reporting of “learner shock” in the clinical context and the challenging nature of some placements, as reflected by our participants is documented (O’Mara et al., 2014). The opportunity to undertake an NHS/acute type placement enabled students to feel “better prepared for advanced entry to the program” and “confident about undertaking their clinical learning experiences”.

6.4 Teaching, learning and support strategies
Many students enter university from college ill prepared to cope with new teaching and learning strategies (McCauley and McClelland, 2004; Sutherland and Crowther, 2006). The programme team were aware of this, and learning and support strategies and interventions within the articulation pathway, were well received, participants described these interventions as used “helpful” “relevant”, “useful” “well planned and designed”. The Virtual Learning Community (VLC) is central to the support process for students on the articulation pathway. There have recently been some developments within the literature exploring the use of technology to support transition (Ribchester et al., 2013), and the team’s use of this platform, together with social media, has enhanced the student articulation experience. The VLC was valued by students as a “central point of contact between pathway students and tutors” and a mechanism for “developing a sense of familiarity with the on-line learning environment used at GCU”. Participants also reported that the VLC “Helped to reduce anxiety regarding on-line learning”. Certain elements of the VLC were particularly helpful in supporting students in their learning, for example self-directed pre-requisites such as “cleanliness champion”, and the “ongoing achievement record” were highlighted by participants as facilitating factors in their transitional journey. The use of a dedicated academic development area where “discussion board”, “learning, development and study materials and videos podcasts” were available, and the dedicated clinical & professional area of the VLC which included “numeracy skills”, “drug calculation tutorials” and “wound care & wound management”, were also seen as important and of value to students. This maybe because this platform is commonly used within Scotland’s Colleges, but also because, as noted earlier (Andrews et al., 2005; O’Shea, 2003; Smedley, 2007), mature students are more likely to be self-directed in their learning.

A second key innovation, the year 2 ‘boot camp’, was also commended by students. Participants reported this as “valuable opportunity to flavour teaching and learning strategies”, “fundamental to the articulation journey”, and “an essential ingredient for learning”. One student commented: “the boot camp was fantastic. It really boosted my confidence – once I had completed it I thought to myself…….you can do this!”

6.5 Importance of the academic advisor and collaborative partnership working
Within this study, participants appeared very aware of the value of effective collaborative partnership working among main stakeholders within the articulation pathway, in particular the role of the academic advisor. Our participants used terminologies such as “shared goals” “clear aims” “common purpose” “same purpose” “common ground” when asked to describe their experiences of partnership working and collaboration. A substantial amount of participants in this study suggested that the articulation programme staff “worked as a team to deliver the articulation pathway”. Analysis also indicated that there had been “good communication links between college, university and clinical staff” during their pathway experiences. This was pleasing to hear, and provided evidence that inter-sector working between colleagues was effective and efficient.
We have known for many years that effective support is vital for a positive student experience. James et al., (2015) explored the experience of students entering university from an access course, concluding that students study more effectively when strong emotional and academic support is in place. It emerged in our study that the academic advisor role was a facilitating factor in the learner journey. Participants stated “The Academic advisor was really helpful to me ……their knowledge and clinical expertise in my field (mental health) really helped me realise the type of patients I would be caring for”. Another said, “The academic advisor was always on hand to me as a student but she was also happy to provide advice to my college tutor and my clinical mentor”, and finally, “The AA role was vital to my transition and articulation pathway. She seemed to make everything more joined up and relevant”.

6.6 Assessment, retention, progression & completion data
Our documentary analysis of assessment, retention, progression and completion data indicates that a high proportion of articulation students have either successfully graduated from their program, or are progressing well towards graduation and registration. From cohort one, ten out of the original twelve students have now successfully graduated from the BN program. Whilst it is acknowledged that two students have not completed, it is worth noting that withdrawal from the program was due to health/personal reasons and was not attributed to academic failure.

Cohort two are currently entering into their final trimester of year 3, preparing for registration and program completion in September 2015. Our data for this cohort indicates that of the original twenty-eight students (mixed field students) twenty-six students continue to progress well with their program. Two students are currently on time out of the program due to academic failure of module assignments. Both of these students will have the opportunity to re-enter their program in September 2015 with a view to completing their program in 2016.

Cohort three are currently in year two of their program having articulated from college in September 2014. Our data for this cohort is again positive and encouraging and suggests that of the original thirty-two mixed-field students recruited to the pathway in September 2014, a total number of thirty-one students continue to progress and perform well in their academic and clinical assignments. One student is on time out of the program due to personal/health issues. Of the thirty one students who continue on the program, all students have passed their module assignments in both theory and practice. Results for the remaining year 2 academic and clinical assignments are ongoing and will be incorporated into future and on-going analysis of findings.

7 Conclusion
The evaluations and analysis undertaken in this study further indicate that interventions have been consolidated into a well-developed and evidence-based “Staged Model of Collaborative Transitional Support” (SMOCTS) which in this study has been successful in facilitating and enhancing the students' transitional journey. Our findings further conclude that we will continue to develop and refine our SMOCTS approach in the light of our ongoing findings and longitudinal tracking of students. Our interventions will continue to be delivered in a range of educational and clinical settings and are reflective of the diversity of the range of learners, learner needs and the collaborative strategies which are required to effectively support the transitional needs of our learners whilst enhancing their learner journey. We recognise that 'one size fits all' cannot be applied to transition, students are individual learners with unique background, needs and experience. Our findings are limited to one university, and one programme, however we have noted similarities and parallels which may highlight the importance of inter-sector working in true partnership to enhance the student transition experience.
8 Action Points, recommendations and early implications for HE/FE service providers within the articulation pathway

Whilst our SMOCTS approach has evaluated positively through longitudinal tracking of our students’ transitional experiences, the need to continue to develop, evaluate and continually improve our transitional model, never the less remains. In order to enhance and further develop understandings of the unique and evolving nature and transitional experience of the articulation student, we would make the following recommendations:

On-going development of pre-entry support strategies and pre-course guidance to help reduce apprehension and anxiety on entry to the programme

On-going development of clinical support strategies to reduce “learner shock” in the practice learning context

On-going support for FE staff from central placements and HE articulation staff in resourcing and selecting suitable and varied placement experiences for articulation students

The introduction, development and ongoing evaluation of an improved “articulation pathway specific” orientation and induction program

The introduction, development and on-going evaluation of the VLC and year two boot-camp

Improved communication and team working to engage staff from both sectors with the VLC

Greater liaison and collaboration between articulation team and other key staff within the HEI

Named, field specific academic advisor on acceptance to, and throughout the duration of the pathway.

On-going collaborative working and shared practices, collaborative teaching and learning materials, shared documentation, team teaching and joint professional development between FE-HE sector staff

Adaption and refinement of mentorship preparation course materials to reflect the developing and evolving role of the articulation student in practice

Further analysis of future cohorts and continued longitudinal tracking of students experiences and performance.
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