

UG Transitions Toolkit: Supporting pre-arrival student reflection

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Abstract:

Over the last 2 years, the University of St Andrews has developed a Transitions Toolkit for incoming students. The purpose of the Toolkit is to provide students with an insight into University level study before they arrive, while gathering key information about their expectations. Crucially, the Toolkit stimulates students to critically self-reflect in preparation for this transition.

Implemented through Qualtrics, questions in the Toolkit were created in conjunction with academic schools and engage with general and subject specific skills underpinning tertiary level study. Questions relate to a range of areas including: motivations for coming to university; expectations; independent learning and critical thinking; approaches to study; and interacting with academic staff. The toolkit has now been used at UG and PGT level.

The data gathered has provided crucial insight into student learning and feeds into improving the student experience. This paper will outline the process of creation and implementation of the survey. The Transitions Toolkit was awarded the Enhancing Student Learning Award in the 2018 Herald Higher Education Awards.

Introduction

Piloted in the 2017/2018 academic year, the Transitions Toolkit project started as a pre-arrival survey for undergraduate students, created to address the issue of students' mismatched expectations, particularly around academic experience. Subsequent to the initial successes of the project, a version for postgraduate taught (Masters/PGT) students was introduced in 2019, and a version for students moving into Honours is currently under development. The aims of the original pre-arrival survey are threefold: 1) to provide students with an insight into university level study before they arrive; 2) to gather key information about their expectations; 3) to stimulate students to critically self-reflect in preparation for this transition. Students are offered the opportunity to answer questions created in conjunction with academic departments, and therefore targeted to consider both general and subject specific skills and experiences. This paper will focus on the genesis and development of the initial pre-arrival toolkit for

undergraduate students, providing background to the project, outlining the development process, content of the tool, outcomes from the survey and subsequent advances.

Background and development

The first version of the toolkit grew out of the QAA Enhancement Theme ‘student transitions’, which ran from 2014-2017. Anecdotal evidence suggested that students’ expectations of university study and their experience within the first semester were mismatched; discussions with colleagues at other institutions flagged up similar concerns.¹ Students’ expectations of studying at university are shaped by several different factors, including their previous academic experiences (e.g. Ramsden, 1992 p. 82; Tinto, 2005). These experiences, and the assumptions, motives and intentions that go with them, can have a significant impact on their subsequent learning and teaching experiences (Biggs, 1996, p. 348; see also Dalgish & Chan, 2005; Ramsden, 1992; Yorke, 2000; Crisp et al 2009; McEwan, 2015). One small scale study of first year politics students found that while 70.59% of students found that the academic workload resembled what they anticipated, half of the students were not prepared for the level of independent learning expected from them (Blair, 2016, pp. 220-221). Thus, although independent learning is an important element of studying at university, managing expectations before students even arrive at university could assist in ameliorating the sense of disorientation they may feel when coming into Higher Education for the first time.

An online tool or survey was identified as the most effective way of reaching the largest number of entrant students. At the time, the only other Scottish institution using a pre-arrival survey to aid with transitions was the University of Edinburgh. In summer 2017, the Centre for Academic, Professional and Organisational Development (now the Centre for Educational Enhancement

¹ In particular the authors of the paper would like to acknowledge initial discussions with Abby Shovlin, at the time Transitions Officer at the Institute for Academic Development at the University of Edinburgh.

and Development- CEED) employed an undergraduate intern for four weeks to investigate the use of pre-arrival surveys and design a prototype for the University of St Andrews. The intern's project determined that critical self-reflection is one of the most important aspects of student transitions and proposed the design of a hybrid online tool; part survey, and part resource providing opportunities for self-reflection and tailored advice based on the respondents' answers. Alongside critical self-reflection, the intern's investigation highlighted some of the following characteristics to be considered: explicitly addressing the transition from one educational environment to another; student focused; relevancy to the individual student; and a sense of connection to the institution and/or individual schools.

The undergraduate intern worked with staff from CEED to arrange stakeholder meetings with all Directors of Teaching. These meetings highlighted variation in the amount of transitional support currently given by Schools. Key areas of student transition felt to be important by Schools included: independent learning; critical thinking; academic guidance and support (including academic expectations); transitions from different educational systems; financial transitions; and school-specific information. Combined with the principles of an effective transition tool already identified, these areas formed the starting block for the design of the first Transitions Toolkit. The first draft of the Toolkit was developed in Qualtrics by the undergraduate intern and subsequently tested and brought to launch by the student development team in CEED.

[The finished toolkit](#)

With the support of the Registry team, the toolkit is shared with incoming students, once they have received an unconditional confirmed offer; distribution starts in June and continues through the summer until after A-Level results. A sample of the questions included in the finished toolkit are outlined in Appendix 1. The 'survey' comprises a mixture of multiple choice/slider questions and free text answers, providing an overview of their expectations of

university study. In addition, there are a few questions on learning identity included by our collaborators in the School of Psychology.

The Toolkit broadly has two sections. The first section, applicable to all students, encourages reflection on their previous experience of learning and their aims for their time at university. The second block, about the learning and teaching experience at university, entails questions tailored to a discipline-specific context. Although the majority of base questions are the same across the board, the content of the questions and the responses the student receive are tailored to the School they intend to study in (for example, in relation to contact hours, or what critical thinking in History entails, or what to expect in Biology lab sessions). Schools were able to provide their own custom questions to highlight particular skills. For some of the base multiple choice questions, the student receives an automated response with advice or information relating to their particular answer. For example, a question asking students about their note-taking intentions would provide guidance on handwritten or electronic notes depending on the response; the questions around time management methods similarly provides different advice depending on the student's anticipated approach.

In the initial design, the high level of customisation lead to a relatively complex survey structure and made some of the data analysis cumbersome; in subsequent versions some of the questions have been streamlined or restructured to improve data extraction.

[What's happened with the data?](#)

In 2018, the Toolkit's pilot year, approximately 40% of eligible students engaged with the survey and received immediate information to help with their transition to university from school or employment. In 2019, over 70% of eligible students engaged with the survey. The results from the survey have been shared with departments and Schools across the University

to aid teaching, student experience and pedagogical research. The impact of the survey can be seen in three interlinking areas:

- 1) The foremost outcome is that it has aided students' transitions to higher education. By allowing students to reflect on their expectations, whilst simultaneously providing detailed information about learning at the University of St Andrews, we are able to support student's orientation to the University before they arrive. This is evidenced by feedback from a former student sabbatical officer from the Students' Association, Alice Foulis, (Director of Education 2019):

The transitions toolkit is very good, and it provided a very helpful service for students. Transitions for students are extremely stressful, most notably the initial transition from leaving school to attending university, which can be very scary. The transition toolkit is great as it overcomes these problems by focusing on the expectations and experience of students. It gave new students the opportunity to explore what studying at university will be like and have a feeling of what being a student at St Andrews includes. This greatly helps with the transitions.

- 2) Secondly, University departments have used the results to implement effective learning strategies. These are built upon the gained awareness of student's current expectations and experience of learning. This is mirrored within CEED, which has been able to tailor workshops according to the outcomes of the survey. For example, a question in the survey which asked about students' expectations to study was used to shape a study skills orientation week workshop.
- 3) Thirdly, and external to the student experience, it has facilitated further education focussed research within the School of Psychology. Two primary projects have been using results from the survey: the first looking at student experience in higher education and the support needed for effective student learning in transitions; and the second focussing on student identity, experience and exploring how the way that students view their place in a university aids or impedes learning.

Future developments

Two subsequent toolkits have been developed from the original undergraduate toolkit.

The first is a postgraduate taught (PGT) version. This version mirrors the undergraduate version and is distributed to students the summer before they arrive for their postgraduate study. The survey piloted in 2019, with 568 students engaging with it before arriving at St Andrews. Similar to the undergraduate version it supported the transition from previous study or employment to postgraduate study.

The second is a 'Transitions to Honours Toolkit' to be launched July 2020. This has been developed for undergraduate students to complete in the summer between second and third year to help support the perceived 'jump' between sub-honours and honours level study (Shovlin and Docherty 2017). This 'jump' can be mapped on the SCQF framework as the shift from Level 8 towards Level 10. The toolkit includes sections on:

- Current expectations
- Honours in practice
- Reflection on current academic behaviours
- Action planning

In addition, the toolkit engages with St Andrews' new Graduate Attributes, encouraging students to identify what attributes they will be developing at Honours level, and support students to actively integrate graduate attributes into their learning.

Conclusion

The use of pre-arrival surveys to aid student transitions into and through university is currently still within its infancy in the UK. The high number of responses received for the pre-arrival toolkits thus far suggest that new students are keen to engage with their institution before they arrive, and find the high completion rate suggests that they find the toolkits helpful and relevant. The hybrid nature of this tool, which stimulates critical reflection and provides advice and information alongside more traditional data collection, has led to a occasionally bulky structure and initially cumbersome data extraction; however, we feel this has been a valuable

pay off to allow a more personalised approach that hopefully makes students feel engaged with the institution before they arrive and better prepared for life in St Andrews when they do.

References

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Appendix 1



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Transitions Toolkit Preliminaries

Why did you choose to come to university? (Please tick all that apply.)

- I would like to be more employable in the future.
- I wasn't ready to begin working life.
- I enjoyed studying at secondary school/another educational institution and wanted to continue my education.
- I want to meet new people.
- I really want to study and explore my chosen subject in more detail.
- I was ready to leave home.
- Family expectation.
- Wasn't sure what to do next.
- Other (Please specify)



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Transitions Toolkit Preliminaries

Some St Andrews terminology...

Here is a short glossary of some common St Andrews terminology:

Class: A class will normally refer to any 'face to face' teaching time that you have with a member of academic staff. This could be a lecture, tutorial or lab.

Course: The term course is used somewhat interchangeably with degree and programme, to mean a particular programme of study leading to a degree award. For example: MA (Hons) Ancient History and Economics, or BSc (Hons) Biology with Arabic.

Credit: The number of credits associated with a module gives an indication of the amount of learning involved. One credit represents approximately ten hours of learning. A full-time undergraduate credit load is 120 credits per academic year.

Module: A module is a self-contained unit of teaching, learning and assessment. You must achieve a final grade of at least 7 in order to pass the module and gain credits. In your first semester, you will usually take 3 modules, at least one of which will be related to your degree intention; the other 2 modules will depend on what degree you are taking and timetabling.

Subject: This usually refers to the academic subject in which you are taking modules (e.g. History, Maths etc.) Many first year students will take up to three subjects in their first year.

You can find a fuller [glossary](#) of terms on the university website.





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Transitions Toolkit Preliminaries

What does independent learning mean to you?

How do you anticipate becoming an independent learner?



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Transitions Toolkit Preliminaries

Independent learning is one of the key skills you learn and have to use whilst at university. It has slightly different meanings in each discipline but overall it means that you have to take responsibility for your own learning process. Schools will provide some guidance for your learning but you will have to make an active effort to engage with the materials they provide and seek out more when necessary.

Independent learning in Biology means taking charge of your own learning and being open to explore new scientific ideas and topics. Biology is taught in a far less prescriptive manner at University and your engagement in lectures and lab work needs to reflect that. During the four undergraduate years you will naturally develop as an independent learner but it will happen faster and easier if you take sufficient notes in the lectures, read around the topics, and fully engage in labs.





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Transitions Toolkit School of English Section

University lectures in first year tend to be in large lecture theatres that could have up to 200 other students in them. Lectures are typically one or two hours long and consist of a lecturer addressing a large audience who take notes. The content and style of your lectures will vary since some lecturers prefer to orate their main points, whilst others provide detailed notes or presentation slides. Some lecturers may have a more interactive style than others. The slides provided may be placed online before or after the lecture but it's always important to take good notes during the lecture.

In a University lecture you're expected to take thorough notes that will likely be different from the way you took notes in classes at school. How are you planning on taking notes during lectures?

- Handwritten notes
- Electronic notes (computer/tablet)



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Transitions Toolkit School of English Section

Handwriting notes is an excellent way to take notes but you should be aware of some different strategies.

Some people prefer to use loose sheet paper for their notes. This can be helpful when you go over your notes later as you can easily add extra notes on the same topic into that topic section of a binder folder. However, it does mean that you have to keep on top of your filing at the end of every day.

Other people prefer to use a notebook to write their notes. If you do choose to use a notebook remember that it can be difficult to add extra notes into a section. Consider numbering the pages of your notebook and then using the first few pages of your notebook as an 'index'. This way, you will easily know on which to find notes about a certain topic.

If your lecturer puts the lecture slides up on Moodle or MMS (the University's online virtual learning platforms) you could also print these off before the lecture and then make notes on the printed slides.

For more information on Note Taking see the [University's Beyond Orientation pages](#) or [CAPOD's academic skills webpages](#). (CAPOD is the Centre for Academic Professional and Organisational Development- you can go there for a range of support with developing academic, professional and transferable skills.)

