

# Student Transitions and Support: A Scan of International Practice

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## Introduction

Supporting students in their transitions into and through their studies has been a priority for the Scottish higher education sector for the past decade. In 2014, QAA Scotland launched a [Student Transitions](#) Enhancement Theme, which explored the skills, strategies and support needed to effectively navigate the many transition points of their studies. As part of the Theme activity, resources were developed to explore different aspects of the student learner journey and support mechanisms to aid students in successfully transitioning into and through their studies is particularly important in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Incoming and current students have experienced two years of disrupted studies which will naturally have consequences on their development of skills and tools to effectively navigate different periods of transition in their studies.

This report forms part of QAA Scotland's Enhancement and Development activity, which develops resources addressing sector-wide priorities that do not directly relate to the current Enhancement Theme. Scans of international practice are used to provide the Scottish higher education sector with examples of innovative international practice in particular areas of interest to inform the review and enhancement of institutional practice. This report and its associated scan of practice focuses on transitions between different stages of the student learning journey and the support provided by higher education institutions from pre-admission to completion.

Examples are drawn from Australia, Canada, China, Finland, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, South Africa and the USA. While the higher education systems may differ in how they are set up and operate, the examples demonstrate a genuine commitment to helping students, including those who have previously been under-represented in higher education, to succeed in their studies and to provide a solid platform on which to build and shape their future lives and careers following on from their studies.

Common features include the provision of clear and readily accessible published information, targeted at different student audiences. This information is supplemented by support available from staff who teach and from others, including student support services, and students who serve as mentors or peer learning facilitators. By these means, students are enabled to develop their academic, social and professional skills as they progress through the different stages of their learning experience.

The international scan includes examples of the different support mechanisms used by higher education institutions to support students at different stages in their learning or research journey. These include the provision of short courses to build confidence and enhance skills; programmes which serve as pathways to higher education for students who do not meet standard admission requirements; programmes supporting the development of study skills and awareness of the need for academic integrity; peer mentoring and support; graduate research student support arrangements; experiential learning; and career planning, guidance and development opportunities.

The examples of practice also demonstrate how technology is being used to monitor student engagement at an individual level in the interests of early intervention to identify issues which may impact on the ability of a student to continue with their studies.

## Transition to higher education and induction

### Access and widening participation

The international scan demonstrates the importance higher education institutions attach to preparing prospective and new students to make the transition to higher education study as smooth as possible. The examples include fee-free alternative routes to higher education for prospective students who do not qualify for entry, including those from indigenous populations, to enable them to qualify for admission to a course (Murdoch University, Australia). Students at the University are also automatically enrolled in 'Murdoch Academic Passport', which provides an orientation to academic integrity at the University.

In Australia too, Charles Sturt University's 'Study Link' initiative offers four categories of short (between 14 and 40 hours) online modules which are intended to prepare incoming students for degree study and continuing students to fill gaps in, or refresh, their knowledge, enhance skills and build student confidence. The categories, which can be taken at a student's own pace up to five months if needed, include transition subjects (communication and critical thinking skills, an introduction to learning online, and courses on 'Transition to Uni study' and 'Getting Ready for Uni Study'); writing subjects; mathematics and statistics subjects; and science subjects. The subjects are available to all and are free for all Australian and New Zealand citizens or holders of a permanent visa.

The University of Witwatersrand (South Africa) has produced a first year guide and offers a 'First Year Experience' (FYE) programme including computer literacy; coping with test and examination anxiety; life coaching; adjusting and thriving at university; learning to celebrate differences; mental wellness coaching; a book club; and leadership camps. The programme is intended to bridge the gap between high school and university by providing a support structure for first year university students which brings together teaching, extracurricular activities, counselling, mentoring, peer tutoring and supplemental instruction. FYE mentors (senior students) serve as advocates for new students and work with the FYE programme, the Student Development and Leadership Unit, faculties and other support units within the University. Elsewhere in South Africa, the University of Kwazulu-Natal provides academic support programmes in the form of access and foundation programmes, restructured first-year courses or additional courses in essential skills such as communication and academic writing to students whose academic potential has not been realised due to disadvantaged educational backgrounds.

The University of Houston (USA) has a student-run and student-led 'Cub Camp' which is a first-year programme, held over three days and two nights at an off-campus retreat the week before classes begin, introducing new students to the University, its traditions and on-campus community. The University also offers exploratory studies involving a short-term preparatory major which intentionally integrates academic support with career counselling; peer tutoring; and academic counselling, as well as success workshops. The University is part of a Houston guided pathways to success initiative involving collaboration between community colleges and universities in the Texas Gulf Coast Region with a view to closing equity gaps in student success in the region. The initiative involves partners working together to systematically re-design and implement comprehensive, integrated strategies to increase student retention, graduation and other indicators of student success.

Northern Arizona University (NAU), USA has established an Office of First-Generation Programs and the University's offer for such students includes 'STAR' (Successful Transition and Academic Readiness Program), a residential summer bridging programme; a 'First-Generation Pathways' programme which includes events organised by the Office of First-Generation Programs and the completion of tasks facilitated by self-guided reflections, e-portfolio submissions and surveys. NAU also offers a four-year 'First Scholars' programme, providing students with scholarship funding and other forms of support including monthly academic success workshops and monthly meetings with professional staff and their peer mentor. Students on this programme are expected to take on greater responsibility and to be much more visible than most students, to be successful in the classroom and to be leaders at the University.

In Canada, Vancouver Island University and McMaster University provide examples of targeted activity to promote access to higher education from students who have grown up in the care system (Vancouver Island University) and as foster children (McMaster University). Tuition fees have been waived, and bursaries and scholarships are available to support these students through their learning experience.

California State University, Long Beach (USA) was commended by the WASC Senior College and University Commission for its continuing commitment to the local community, exemplified by the 'Promise' programme, which has raised the percentage of local area students entering the University and fostered close partnership between the University and Long Beach City College that includes enhanced advising and support for transfer students.

Recognising the importance of education to the integration of refugees, the German Academic Exchange Service (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD)), in collaboration with universities and partner organisations, has developed various targeted measures to enable universities to offer access to higher education to those who wish to study, and who are appropriately academically qualified. As part of this approach, the University of Potsdam has developed a programme and support for refugee teachers to help them to achieve full recognition to work in a German school on completion of their studies.

### **The use of student tracking to support student achievement**

Georgia State University (USA) uses predictive analytics and a system of more than 800 alerts to track all undergraduates daily, identify at-risk behaviours, and has advisers respond to alerts by intervening in a timely manner to get student back on track. The 'GPS' system, which went live in 2012, has resulted in improved retention rates and graduating seniors taking fewer excess courses to complete their degrees. The University consolidated with Georgia Perimeter College, a two-year institution with multiple campuses in Atlanta in 2016 and, using the GPS system and adapting its advising strategy, it has seen an increase in graduates seeking associate degrees. The extension of the GPS system is providing the University with the opportunity to better understand and support transfer pathways between two and four-year institutions.

### **Peer mentoring**

Higher education institutions are recognising the benefits of peer advice provided to students transitioning to higher education by students who at a more advanced stage of their studies. These include the use of student tutors at Aalto University (Finland), and peer-assisted study sessions (PASS) and weekly interactive study groups facilitated by second and third-year

students (known as PASS facilitators) at the University of Otago (New Zealand). The PASS facilitators work with students on subject-related problems/questions to support better understanding of the course material, while also developing study skills. Running from week two to week 13 of both semesters, PASS enables participants to regularly revise course material in a social, collaborative and interactive environment. As noted above, the University of Witwaterstand's FYE programme is supported by student mentors who work as Orientation Leaders; assist with FYE classes; and promote student activities, events and campus involvement. The student mentors support new students' academic performance, achievement and social development in the process.

### **Academic writing and learner support**

At Massey University (New Zealand), the University's Centre for Teaching and Learning offers students a free assignment pre-reading service, giving them the opportunity to submit a draft assignment for review and advice with a turnaround time of three working days. Students complete an online assignment submission form including full details of the assignment topic or question; relevant instructions; assignment due date; and the student's questions or concerns about their draft. The assignment pre-reading service provides feedback and advice about any difficulties identified within a draft; responds and provides relevant information relating to students' questions; and comments on features such as structure, focus, style, presentation, use of outside sources, and referencing. The Centre makes it clear that it will not act as a proofreading service, identifying every mistake or error in a draft; indicate a grade for an assignment; comment on matters directly relating to course or subject content; or review assignments after they have been handed in. Students receive their assignments back with comments and suggestions via the University's Academic Writing and Learning Support Stream site and receive an automated email notifying them when an assignment is ready. Students also receive a MS Word document summarising the writing consultant's feedback and the consultant may also attach appropriate material which will help students to address identified problems. Information about eligibility to use the service and the number of assignments permitted for submission each semester is available via the University's online learning system (Stream).

## **Intermediate to advanced learner/completion stage**

### **Counselling and support**

Aalto University (Finland) offers counselling and support for learning, motivation, self-regulation, study skills, coping with stress, and career choices. Students can contact a study psychologist for help with time management, procrastination and lack of motivation, when they are looking for a study method that suits them or they are experiencing study-related stress, anxiety or burnout. A career counselling psychologist specialises in career and life planning and transition to work. There is also a psychologist for doctoral students. Courses and workshops on student wellbeing and improving study skills are available. Student health care services are available for students with more general psychological well-being or mental health concerns. The University's 'AllWell? Study' well-being questionnaire has enabled it to identify factors influencing students' stress and workload, leading to the development of study guidance and supervision; workshops for teachers to focus on students' workload and support students' study progress and well-being; and study skills online content. Students receive personal feedback on their strengths, as well as tips for personal development in study skills and study well-being.

## Student engagement

In Summer 2020, Freie Universität, Berlin (Germany) embarked on a campus-wide participatory project entitled 'Teaching and Education in 2030 - Shaping the Future Together', involving students and staff of the University. The project is seeking to address three key questions: (1) What characterises a positive university culture in terms of education? (2) What makes teaching and learning at Freie Universität special? and (3) What should education at the University look like ten years from now? The intention is to develop a shared vision for the future of education and teaching at the University, reflected in the development of the University's mission statement and strategy for teaching and learning. The project is expected to benefit from the experience gained from delivering teaching and learning digitally and remotely and is being progressed through a series of events and focus groups that are expected to extend into the second half of 2021.

Stellenbosch University (South Africa) is also seeking to create learning communities where students, staff and alumni can experience meaningful learning and be partners in co-creating knowledge. The University is developing networked and collaborative teaching and learning to this end. It offers a wide range of services to enhance students' in-class (curricular) and out-of-class (co-curricular) experience to promote their personal, academic, social and financial wellbeing, as well as their leadership skills. Students are encouraged to become involved with the broader community.

## Peer mentoring

As indicated above (see 'Peer mentoring' in Transition to higher education and induction), the University of Otago engages students as PASS facilitators in supporting fellow students through their studies. The University's Higher Education Development Centre offers paid and volunteer positions for students, providing them with opportunities to develop leadership skills and graduate attributes, and to add value to their degree through work experience in a tertiary setting. PASS facilitators are expected to create a collaborative learning environment with a group of students, demonstrating different ways of learning course content rather than re-teaching content. Senior students are trained as peer writers to help first-year students in effective writing and study skills. Volunteering opportunities are available for students to facilitate informal English conversation groups for students to develop their oral skills and learn about New Zealand sayings and culture. Students can also join the 'Language Mentor @ Otago' programme and be partnered with a student who is keen to practice their English and learn more about New Zealand/Aotearoa and Kiwi culture.

At Osaka University (Japan), student support for job hunting and career development includes career supporters who are Osaka University students who have received a job offer. The supporters advise younger students on their future careers and job hunting, as well as planning and running job hunting events.

## Enrichment/employability activities

McGill University (Canada) offers a range of experiential learning opportunities (both credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing) for students. These may take the form of internships of varying duration; field or research opportunities; and exchange or study trips. The University provides students with tools and guidance to help them to reflect on their experiential learning; gain self-awareness; enhance their effectiveness; and prepare for life and work after graduation.

At Queen's University (Canada), second or third-year students (domestic and international) in Engineering and Applied Science, Arts and Science, Computing, and Health Sciences are able to undertake work experience of between 12 and 16 months, as part of the University's Undergraduate Internship Programme. These paid and professionally supervised internships provide students with career-related development opportunities to learn more about current advances, practices and technologies in business and industry.

At Nottingham University Ningbo (China), an annual internship fair also provides students with opportunities to meet representatives from different companies seeking interns, providing students with a means to gain experiential learning. In addition, a 'Nottingham Advantage Award' (NAA) programme focuses on student skills, employability, and personal and academic development. The NAA programme is available in Nottingham University's UK, Malaysia and China campuses and credits awarded on completion of the programme can be transferred from the UK or Malaysia campuses. Students can study modules focused on career skills, mentoring, cultural awareness, entrepreneurship and volunteering. The aim of the Advantage Award is to provide students with opportunities to develop a range of attributes and skills and engage in activities that will enhance their overall learning experience and employability.

At the University of Witwatersrand (South Africa), the Development and Leadership Unit (part of the Division of Student Affairs) provides students with development opportunities for personal growth through engagement with co-curricular activities and student leadership training. It also holds a WITS University Student Leadership Awards Ceremony to recognise students who have played a significant role in and outside of the classroom, demonstrated and displayed the values and ethos of the University, and have served the student community.

Georgia State University (USA) is committed to creating pathways from college to career. One such pathway, involving the Multicultural Center, includes experiential learning through internships and signature experiences. This involves student collaboration with professional staff and graduate level students to conduct research centred on social issues reflecting their academic focus and career aspirations. Another initiative involves Multicultural Competence and Peer Education (MAP) Ambassadors who are selected each academic year and trained in workshop facilitation, programme and event planning, as well as facilitation mediation. These initiatives provide students with the skills and resources they need to develop as professionals in their chosen field. To ensure student success as they progress to the professional world, Multicultural Center discussion-based workshops and programmes provide students with opportunities to engage in dialectic discourse. Students who attend these programmes gain knowledge and the motivation to share opinions, experiences and ideas that are transferred to their academic courses.

### **Support for research students**

The Graduate School at Cornell University (USA) has a 'Transitions... Navigating Graduate School for First-Year Students' programme which is part of a continued orientation experience for incoming graduate and professional students. The Transitions programme is intended to enable students to gain valuable information and skills to make a successful transition into the role of a Cornell graduate or professional student. Transitions workshops cover such areas as understanding and overcoming imposter syndrome; mentoring; maximizing the time available; understanding doctoral findings; developing a strategic plan; serious scholarship and responsible conduct; and navigating relationships and the environment as a graduate/professional student.

In New Zealand, the University of Otago's support for graduate research students includes readily accessible advice and guidance relating to the different stages of their research journey. Every candidate must have a primary supervisor who is supported by the appointment of one or more co-supervisors and/or the constitution of an advisory panel (also called a departmental advisory committee) to review progress regularly, contributing to the identification and resolution of any disputes which may arise between the student and the supervisor(s). Some departments also operate a postgraduate committee responsible for providing academic and practical support to PhD candidates within a department or school. The expectations of graduate research students and their supervisors are discussed at an early stage of a student's candidature as part of a 'Student-Supervisor Agreement' and a copy of the agreement must be uploaded in eVision (the institution's intranet) as part of the first progress report process. The agreement is intended to be reviewed as the research progresses to ensure that it remains on track. Graduate research students have access to a range of workshops, training and one-to-one consultations provided by the Graduate Research School, Information Technology Services, Higher Education Development Centre, and the Library Information Service. Specifically, tailored workshops are also provided for particular programmes and other groups.

Monash University (Australia) provides clear signposting to support and a range of resources available for its students, including graduate research students. The resources include a step-by-step guide to take students through the process of graduate research and writing, from planning to writing and publishing.

## Conclusion

The examples demonstrate the importance of a clear focus on the needs of specific target groups and a holistic approach to addressing barriers or challenges to entry to higher education and to successful completion of studies, aided by student performance tracking enabling early intervention, as required. They also highlight the value higher education institutions place on peer support from fellow students for students at earlier stages of their study, whether this be through buddy/mentoring, peer assisted teaching and learning arrangements, or peer involvement in support of career development and job-hunting activities.

Peer-to-peer approaches which complement and supplement more formal approaches to teaching contribute to developing students' confidence and understanding of study requirements, providing a more informal and personalised learning experience for students which complements and supplements other more formal teaching and learning approaches that may exist. Students engaged in supporting newer students also benefit from this experience given the scope to enhance their CVs and subsequent employment prospects as a result of the opportunities provided for them to develop through training and leadership schemes provided by their institutions.

As is clear from the examples above, students are also actively engaged in helping to determine how education and teaching should develop in the future and are involved in knowledge co-creation. Finally, the examples given above relating to research students serve as a reminder that their different needs and aspirations also need to be supported as they complete their transition from fledgling to accomplished and authoritative researchers.

## Appendix 1: Institutions included in the international scan of practice Introduction

### Australia

Charles Sturt University  
Monash University  
Murdoch University

### Canada

McGill University  
McMaster University  
Queen's University  
Vancouver Island University

### Finland

Aalto University

### Germany

Freie Universität Berlin  
University of Potsdam

### Japan

Osaka University

### New Zealand

University of Otago  
Massey University

### South Africa

Stellenbosch University  
University of Kwazulu-Natal  
University of the Witwatersrand

### United States of America

California State University, Long Beach  
Cornell University  
Georgia State University  
University of Houston  
Northern Arizona University

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