

## Re-framing The First-year Undergraduate Student Experience

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### Abstract

The 'first-year' student experience is a critical transition period for new students. Navigating it successfully can help students in their first-year at university settle into their studies and provide a foundation for retention and success. It has traditionally focused on students entering year one of an undergraduate degree. However, due to the increased diversity in the student body and various entry routes into different levels of university study, what constitutes the first-year student experience and the support students' receive needs to be re-framed. This paper highlights the changes that have occurred in higher education, and puts forward a new student lifecycle to assist institutions effectively support new undergraduate students in their first-year of study and beyond across academic and non-academic activities.

**Keywords:** First year experience, diversity, student lifecycle.

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\* (Insert Article type via "File|Properties|Custom Properties"). URL: [http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/\[144\]](http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/[144])

## 1. Introduction

The first-year student experience is regarded by student experience researchers and educators as a critical transition period for new students in helping them settle into university life and to use it as a launch pad for successful learning, retention and success (Upcraft and Gardner, 1989; Thomas, 2002; Tinto, 2002; Thomas, 2012, Morgan, 2012). The importance of the first-year experience was first identified in the United States over 30 years ago with the University of South Carolina being credited with starting the movement. The University is home today to the National Resource Centre for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition. The first-year experience has traditionally focused on students entering year one of an undergraduate degree. However, the landscape of higher education has changed dramatically in recent years in terms of student numbers, student diversity, entry routes and study modes. As a result of these changes, the definition of the first-year student experience needs to be 're-framed' in order to help HE institutions deliver a high quality student experience for all new students entering their first-year of study. The aims of this paper are fourfold. First, it will explore the reasons for growth in HE participation. Second, it will highlight how the diversity in higher education (HE) today, due to entry routes and different modes of study, requires the definition to be revisited. Third, it will put forward a new student lifecycle that identifies and supports students in their first-year in higher education and that seamlessly links to their continuing levels of study. And lastly, it will look at the multifaceted characteristics of the student body today which need to be considered and addressed as part of the first-year experience planning process.

## 2. The Changing Landscape Of Higher Education

### *The reasons for the growth in higher education*

Participation in higher education in the UK at both undergraduate and postgraduate level has continued to grow since the 1970s. In the UK in the 1960s, approximately seven per cent of the population went to university (Pugsley, 2004). By 2010, the percentage of 18-30 year olds

participating in HE had risen to 45 per cent (DBIS, 2010).

The growth has not been restricted to the UK. Pre 1970, around 50 percent of students in higher education were based in North America and Western Europe, but today this figure is around 25 percent due to competing Asian and Pacific Rim markets (UNESCO, 2009). United Nation participation statistics show that global participation in higher education is not slowing down at undergraduate level (UNESCO, 2010). The most dramatic growth was between 2000 and 2008 with 52 million students enrolling worldwide (UNESCO, 2009).

There are a multitude of reasons to explain the growth in higher education in recent years. First, for many governments their commitment to higher education is as a result of them seeking to improve their industrial competitive global position (DTI, 1998), and their position in the global market of higher education (DfES, 2003: DfES 2003b). The latter phenomenon has arisen 'due to the increasing mobility of students and graduates worldwide' (Kumar, 2008:5). It is argued that an educated workforce produces more productive labour with graduates often working in the area of the university at which they studied, and HEIs have generated money through setting up 'spin-out' companies to develop their research (Universities UK, 2007). In 2003/4, 1000 active spin-out companies, which employed over 15,000 staff and generated around £3 billion to the UK economy, were reported to exist (Universities UK, 2007). Higher education institutions (HEIs) are also large employers and can often be the biggest in their area. The local economy is further supported by HE through students using local accommodation, hospitality and entertainment services.

Second, governments across the world have signalled their desire to improve social mobility in their countries and it is acknowledged that universities play a key role in contributing towards this goal (Cabinet Office, 2011). In the UK, the approach adopted to achieve this aim has been to widen participation at all levels of study, develop lifelong learning strategies and link educational progression to continuing and professional development (Thomas, 2002; Stuart et al, 2008). As a result, this has led to an increase in higher educational institutions offering a range of study options such as full-time and part-time study, distance and work-based learning.

Third, with the expansion of a knowledge economy and knowledge intensive industries, graduates are in demand. There is an increasing pool of well qualified and skilled undergraduate and postgraduates who are providing employers with greater choice. The demand for higher education at both undergraduate and postgraduate level generally goes up when there is a downturn in the economy and fewer jobs available as '*individuals who lose their jobs, or fear low prospects for employment in declining economies, see a university or college degree as a means to better employment prospects*' (Douglass, 2010:4). In the past 20 years in the UK, participation in HE has reflected the state of the economy.

Lastly, participation in higher education of a diverse student body is said to produce a range of benefits for the individual as well as society and the economy because '*a diverse student population is essential to vibrant intellectual enquiry and a resilient knowledge economy. It encourages a higher education offer that is socially and culturally diverse, and more representative of local communities*', and, '*it is vital in creating a fairer society, securing improvements in social mobility and supporting economic growth*' (HEFCE, 2011:6). Higher education offers the individual with an opportunity for social mobility by providing them with knowledge and skills that can lead to better employment and salary prospects than a non-graduate (Universities UK, 2011). Research suggests that successfully completing a higher education degree provides a higher financial return over a lifetime (Universities UK, 2011). In the UK, it is calculated that a graduate will earn around 27 percent (around £100,000 at today's calculation) more than someone who completed up to 'A' level or equivalent over a lifetime (Sianesi, 2003). Those who have experienced higher education are more likely to have friends with different religions, ethnicity and social class (Lloyd, 2010), more likely to make better consumer choices and are less likely to get into debt (Morettie, 2004). Graduates are also said to experience better health and lower incidences of obesity thus reducing burdens on health care (OECD, 2010, Baum et.al, 2004; 2010).

These benefits produced by participating in higher education have been recognised by governments, the individual and business and industry resulting in the massification of university level study. With massification comes diversification and this is reflected in UK HE institutions with the existence of various entry routes, different modes of study and multiple identities in the student body.

### *Diversification in higher education*

No longer is the average student an 18 year old and embarking on 3 year undergraduate degree. Today, this only constitutes one type of student participating in higher education. The diversification of study modes and entry routes are important factors to consider when developing an inclusive model that is applicable to the first-year experience today.

### Diversification of study modes and entry routes

Across HE institutions and colleges of further education, courses are delivered via full-time and part-time study which can be flexible (i.e. transfer between full-time and part-time), work and class room based and via distance learning. Depending on the qualification, courses can range from 6 months to 4 years. Undergraduate degree students can transfer to a different course within and between institutions. These diverse delivery modes attract students with different learning and support requirements. A student who chooses to study part-time may do so for a range of reasons such as fitting it around family or work requirements, or spreading the cost of study. In the UK, part-time study at undergraduate level in 2010/11 accounted for 28.5 per cent of students studying in the UK with the majority having UK domiciled status (HESA, 2011). A distance learner may choose this delivery mode because moving nearer their institution of study is not practical or affordable, or they are combining it with work experience. Course changes and transfers between different modes of study and institutions can happen because students do not like the course they are on; they have not fitted in at their chosen institution or they find that the mode of study they are undertaking does not fit well with their life demands.

A popular entry route today is the opportunity for students to transfer from further education (FE) or Community Colleges (having completed a two year course) into higher education where they enter partway through a programme/course (direct entry). Grubb states that the '*the ability of students to transfer to four-year colleges and then compete as equals against students who begin in four-year colleges is one test of the acceptability of community colleges within higher education*' (Grubb, 1991:195). Transfer and direct entry routes have helped

students enter university through routes that were not previously available and enable them to persevere in their studies. In the UK, it is argued that this has been a major contribution to widening participation (Sinclair, 2005).

Due these changes, identifying who are first-year students has become problematic and it impacts on the delivery of a high quality student experience across the student lifecycle. As a result, it is important to reframe the first-year student experience to take account of these complexities.

### 3. Reframing The First-year Experience

All students need to progress through three broad stages: settling in; progressing through their studies and preparing to leave. The traditional student lifecycle model illustrates this journey (see figure 1).



Figure 1 The Student Lifecycle Model: Adapted from list in HEFCE, 2001:15

However, the traditional lifecycle model is very broad and thus it is a 'one size fits all approach'. The first-year student experience encompasses all aspects of student life (i.e. academic and non-academic spheres) with the academic imperative being at the heart of it. Every student's experience at university is unique to them but there are pivotal 'transitions' that all students need to navigate.

A student entering level 1 or as a direct entry/transfer student part way through the duration of a degree course (e.g. level 2 or 3) are all students in their first-year at university and they need to go through the same stages of settling in and progressing through their studies. Each of them needs access to the same information as they are new to the institution, but critically, they also need information that is applicable to their particular level of study and to their support requirements. It is one of these elements that is often lacking and which can create problems when settling into university and study.

Therefore, it is essential to have a lifecycle that identifies students at the pivotal transition points regardless of the level they enter. The Student Experience Practitioner Model has been designed to identify and support new students at all levels as well as returning students across academic and non-academic spheres during the key transition stages of the university journey.

#### *The journey of the first-year student today*

The Student Experience Practitioner Model has six stages (see figure 2) that all students should go through regardless of whether undertaking a full or part-time degree; a short or long course; studying at undergraduate or postgraduate level; at one institution or partly at another or entering as a level 1 or direct entry student.

The model uses the term 'level' instead of 'year' as it more accurately describes the position of the student in their academic journey and it enables the model to be applied in a range of HE structures which use different terminology to describe the various levels of study. For example, a student may be in their second year at University but still studying at Level 1 because they are a part-time student. If a student is studying in the UK, 'Level 1' is called 'Level 4' and in the USA, it is referred to as the freshman. The first four stages of the model make up the first-year experience.

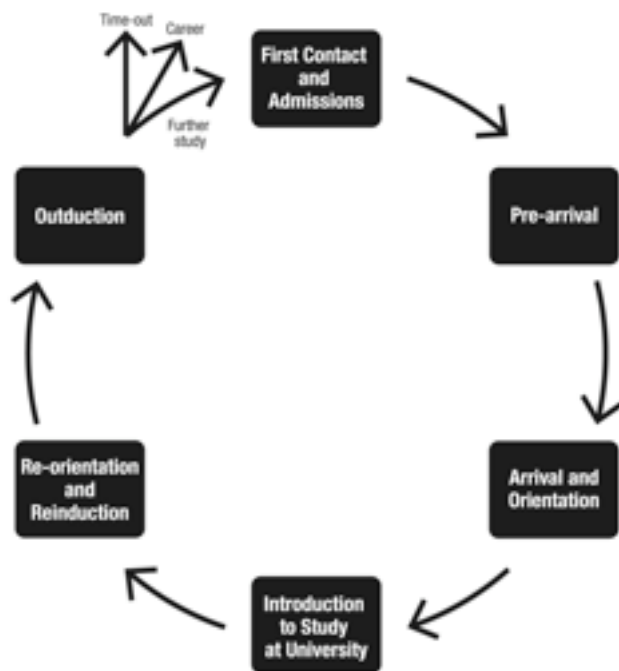


Figure 2 The stages in the Student Experience Practitioner Model (Morgan, 2013)

### First contact and Admissions

This first contact and admissions stage is where aspirations and expectations about university are often established if they haven't been already through schools and colleges, family and friends. It is essential that the targeted information is provided that highlights the support the institution can provide applicants with a range of support requirements. Any promises made in institutional literature must reflect what is deliverable within the study home unit (e.g. department, school). It is now that an institution, especially the potential study home unit, should start to shape the aspirations and expectations of applicants.

### Pre-arrival

The pre-arrival stage is the preparation stage for arriving at university for students and institutions. It is important that new students start to feel part of the university, their faculty, school or department, and learning community. Pre-Arrival is the period when reinforcement of



the questions raised and answered during the First Contact and Admissions stage should occur.

### Arrival and Orientation

Arriving at university can be a seminal moment in a person's life for a number of reasons. It may be the first time an 18 year old has lived away from home or it is an experience that mature students never thought possible. Arrival and orientation is often referred to as 'induction' in many universities. However, they are not the same thing. The first two weeks at an institution for the new student is about moving into their accommodation, paying their fees, starting their teaching timetable and generally finding their way around university life. They are arriving at university and orientating themselves. Students are likely respond to this stage very differently, with some settling in very quickly and others struggling. This stage may need to be repeated more than once if students are late arriving at university (e.g. international students due to visa issues).

### Induction to Study

The term induction should refer to the activity of learning how to study at university. There is a skill to learning how to study at higher education level. Students learn at different speeds and it is not something that occurs over a two week period when students start university. The induction to study stage is critical in helping students lay the foundations for successful study at all levels in their course by equipping them with the relevant study and research skills. Each level of study requires different skills that need to be learnt. For a new student to be inducted into study requires them to go through at least one academic cycle (e.g. submitting coursework, receiving feedback and sitting an examination for a module). Depending on the length and structure of a course, this could take place over a semester or a full academic year. For a student who is entering partway through a course (e.g. direct entry into level 2 or 3), the challenge is to learn quickly how to study at university and how to study at a particular level (see reorientation and reinduction).

### Reorientation and reinduction

Institutions should not make the assumption that a returning student knows what to expect in their forthcoming level of study, or that study or personal pressures will be less than those of new first-year students. In fact, as a student progresses, the academic and personal pressures are more likely to increase. Students who are returning to study from having successfully progressed from one academic level of study to the next, from a placement or study abroad, a different study mode or a period of intermission, are likely to need as much support, advice and guidance as new students starting their studies. Reorientation for returners can take place in the first week of the new academic year. The activity is a time when students can reflect on what they need to do in the coming year and for the institution to update them on changes that have occurred over the inter level vacation period. Reinduction introduces returning students to new skills to help them actively engage in the learning and assessment processes in their new level of study. The duration will vary depending on the length of the course.

### Outduction

A lot of time is spent inducting new students into study and university life but little time is spent preparing students to leave and adapt to life post study. The term *Outduction* was coined by Layer and Harle from the University of Bradford who argued that just as students are inducted into university so they should be outducted (Layer, 2005). Leaving the protected environment of university can be a daunting experience and a difficult transition for some students. For the institution, this outduction stage can improve the destination statistics. Today, students need to think about what they want to do when they leave university as soon as they start their course regardless of length. The start of the Outduction stage is determined by the length of the course.

The different stages needs to be mapped to the duration of their course (see figure 3) but it is important that they are not linked to specific levels of academic study in the progression route to avoid confusion (e.g. induction to study Level 1, reorientation and reinduction Level 2 and outduction Level 3).

Example one      A student on a one year course

The student will complete Induction to Study by the end of semester 1 or term 1; undertake Reorientation at the start of semester 2 or term 2; Reinduction through semesters 2 and 3 and will start Outduction just after the start of semester 2 or the beginning of term 3.

Example two      A student on a three year full-time degree

The student will undertake Induction to Study during Level 1; Reorientation at the start of Levels 2 and 3; Reinduction during Levels 2 and 3 and start Outduction midway through Level 2 and complete it in Level 3.

Example three      A direct entry student into Level 2

The student will undertake Arrival and Orientation alongside Reorientation with the students who have progressed into Level 2. Their Induction to Study will run alongside or be incorporated with Reinduction activities aimed at returning students.

Example four      A student who has intermitted

A student who has experienced a period of intermission for over two years (e.g. one year placement and one year through illness) then the student should undertake the same process as a direct entry student.

Figure 3 Mapping of the Practitioner Model (Morgan, 2012)

Identifying who are first-year students and the key transition stages they need to progress through is essential. However, this needs to be accompanied by an understanding of how different student identities can impact on the first-year experience and the ability for students to settle in, progress and succeed.

*Identifying first-year withdrawal threats through understanding student identities*

Research tells us that students are more likely to withdraw from the studies during their first-year than in the returning years (e.g. Tinto, 2002 and 2012; Thomas and Quinn, 2006; Yorke and Longden, 2008; Thomas, 2012; Morgan, 2012). Students drop out of HE for a multitude of reasons which include poor subject choice or institutional fit; course structure (e.g. length, mode of study); student demographics (e.g. social class, age, gender); previous learning experience (e.g. not prepared for higher level study); personal reasons (e.g. family commitments, financial pressures) and an unsatisfactory and inadequate university experience (e.g. poor quality and weak university management). It is essential to recognise that these withdrawal threats facing new first-year students can be more prevalent amongst students with multiple identities.

Student diversity is a broad term that encompasses a range of characteristics that include mobile students (national and international), those with diverse entry qualifications, a high percentage of female participation, and the participation of non-traditional or non-standard groups such as mature, lower socioeconomic, minority groups and disabled students (Stuart, 2006; Heagney, 2008; Harper and Quayle 2009; Morgan, 2013). However, due to a lack of authoritative definition of diversity, it is argued that some groups get marginalised or not even included in this category, such as part-time and commuter students (Silverman et. al, 2009), and students with different sexual orientations (Schueler et al., 2009).

Higher education statistics in the UK, as in other countries, categorise students in terms of gender, disability, domiciled status, age and study modes. However, just as the student body is diverse so too is the individual. The student is not one-dimensional but multi-dimensional so it is essential that broad categories as mentioned above are not used to silo students and dictate support. For example, a student who has declared a disability can become labelled as a

disabled student and their support may be driven by this. However, they may also be a mature student who commutes to university on a daily basis. Commuter students can struggle to integrate into university social support systems and to develop a sense of belonging with their institution (Tinto, 1993, Thomas, 2012). A major study in the UK looking at all early leavers from 70 English universities found that 48 per cent of early leavers were commuter students (Stephens, 2012). Mature students are often from low income groups and are first generation students (Heagney, 2008; Purcell et al., 2007). They commonly enter through non-standard entry qualification routes and may often start their university studies as transfer/direct entry students from further education (Sinclair, 2005). Mature students tend to be concentrated in new universities and colleges of further education and often dominate part-time course enrolments (McGivney, 2003). These characteristics can all impact on student persistence and degree attainment (Astin, 1993) as well as their overall university experience satisfaction. Support needs to be designed so that students can 'pick' and 'mix' support to put together a package of targeted assistance. To do this requires greater inter-department coordination within a university and joined up thinking in the delivery of support services.

#### **4. The Importance Of Inter-university Coordination And Collaboration In Supporting The First-year Experience**

Research highlights that effectively delivered academic and non-academic support plays an important role in the persistence and success of first year students (Tinto, 1993; Yorke and Longden, 2004; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Morgan, 2012). However, providing high quality support to students across academic and non-academic spheres in their first-year at university and beyond requires the input and cooperation of a range of staff across the university. Support must not operate in isolation or in one direction but seamlessly join up. The study home unit and university-level services need to coordinate their activities to ensure that the relevant information, guidance and support are consistent, accessible and available to all students across all levels of study. Students tend to see their home unit as the centre of their

studies and university life until they graduate. Upon graduation students often identify with the 'university'. If central service providers such as student services, learning resources and the students' union can use the home unit to advertise and even deliver their services, students may feel that the services and support they are receiving are being tailored to meet their specific requirements. This 'outreach' approach helps effectively target limited resources.

## **5. Supporting Withdrawal From The First-year Experience**

Inevitably, first year students will withdraw. Although it is viewed by the institution as a negative event, it can be a very positive move for an individual (e.g. a student registered on a course they do not want to do). Students who do withdraw should not be called drop outs as this labels them as a failure. It is more conducive to call them early leavers. A proactive and positive attitude from the institution towards the withdrawal process enables the student to feel better about themselves and the final decision they make. As a result, some students may not withdraw but for those who do, the objective of an institution is to create a withdrawal environment that encourages the early leaver to think about returning to HE study at a later date and even return to the same institution.

## **6. Conclusion**

The first year student experience today is more complex than ever before. The momentum through the different stages in the Practitioner Model student lifecycle needs to be maintained by all key service providers and by students to ensure successful progression and completion. Diversity in higher education creates challenges and effectively supporting students requires an institution to think carefully about its constitution and composition, its processes, how it structures its learning and engages students and staff and, how it creates a sense of belonging. An excellent first-year student experience is one where everyone involved in the activity is left satisfied.

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