Breaking down barriers to progression – the blended way
Dr Henriette Harnisch and Lou Taylor-Murison, University of Wolverhampton

Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of Warwick, 1-4 September 2010

1. Background and Introduction

Too often points of transition become exit points across the sectors and phases of education. This is particularly true at the point of transition from compulsory to tertiary and Higher Education. There is a breadth of literature identifying the factors that lead to non-progression and, once in HE, to non-completion (Yorke 2000; Tinto 1993; Aynsley and Jacklin 2009; Childs and Spencer 2002; Crabtree et al 2007). Increasingly, however, more attention is paid to the correlation between effective student preparation pre-entry to stay-on and progression rates once in Higher Education (Yorke 2000; Currant and Keenan 2009).

This preparation relates to generic aspects of information, advice and guidance but also to skills based development of students at pre-entry level. Institutional data on non-progression following the first year points, at least in part, to a skills gap that students experience when transferring into HE. Effective collaboration, therefore, between the pre-entry sector and HE, takes on some significance in terms of preparing students for higher level study.

This is clearly in line with government policy, as articulated through the HEFCE strategic plan, as well as DCSF strategy documentation. The HEFCE strategic plan for 2006 – 11 (revised in 2009) states:

We will also encourage HEIs to develop further their links with target schools and colleges to create structural, sustainable relationships that operate at the levels of governance, the curriculum and student support. In doing so, HEIs and schools will be able to build upon the achievements of the increasing numbers of people gaining qualifications that will enable them to enter HE by ensuring that they are able to choose the progression pathway that best meets their educational and career aspirations.1

As one strategy to address both the issue of a perceived barrier into HE and that of a potential skills gap, the University of Wolverhampton developed and maintains a programme of undergraduate modules which are taught at pre-entry level. The programme is aligned to level 3 curriculum taught in schools and colleges and encompasses traditional academic and vocational curriculum areas, as well as qualifications emerging from the 14-19 curriculum reform, a reform, which is seen to have significant implications for learning and teaching in Higher Education as being significant [UUK, 2009]).

1.2. Transition – an attempt of a definition

This programme of Higher Education Modules in Schools and Colleges (HEMiS) has been running very successfully for a number of years and provides successfully an opportunity for learners to engage with Higher Education at a point where decisions about progression beyond the compulsory phase of education are yet to be made. It is particularly relevant in the context of more recent efforts designed to move away from a prevailing deficiency model of

student transition and retention towards a more proactively preparatory approach. Much work has been undertaken in this area, identifying differences in teaching and learning styles, actual or perceived, across the educational sectors and student support, and the development of strategies in order to address gaps (Crabtree et al., 2007).

This paper will explore the implications of a more curriculum based model of supporting transition, which focuses on developing embedded skills and motivations, and the role of technology enhanced teaching and learning in the delivery of these. We propose, based on the pilot discussed, a model towards a conceptual framework for transition that is both curriculum based and covers a wider age range than transition defined by Higher Education traditionally does. We will therefore aim to define the term transition before introducing the pilot case study and its implications.

As referred to previously, the term transition from the vantage point of Higher Education is deployed very often as denoting the exact point at which a student moves from secondary to tertiary education. Bill Johnston (Johnston, 2010) defines the concept as two tracked, encompassing both the student’s experience and the (HE) institution’s support activities. Within this definition he identifies four categories which define areas of transition:

- cultural and community changes
- academic changes
- social changes
- personal changes

In further defining these key areas, Johnston highlights what they in turn contain and how they are broken down further. He goes on to say that institutions address transition, as defined here, as ‘over-reliant on piecemeal and reactive measures to specific problems and crises’. He calls for the First Year Experience (FYE) to be reviewed and for pedagogy to be adapted in order to meet students’ needs in the process of transition to be met.

Building on this definition we would like to suggest that the concept of transition can be positioned much earlier on in a student’s educational career. Just as we would consider calling the first year at university ‘year one’ as somewhat contentious, given that even the most direct route would suggest 13 years of education prior to a student entering university, we would suggest that transitions happen throughout a student’s educational experience.

The figure below denotes points of transition currently encountered by a student, starting with the move from the end of the primary phase of schooling (Key Stage 2):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Stage 2</th>
<th>Key Stage 3</th>
<th>Key Stage 4</th>
<th>Key Stage 5 (post-16)</th>
<th>Further and/or Higher Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Y3–Y6</td>
<td>Y7–Y9</td>
<td>Y10–Y11</td>
<td>Y12–Y13</td>
<td>Y14+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig 1

Whilst the figure necessarily appears over-simplistic, there are a number of points we would like to highlight. The diagram starts with the primary phase of education, ie Key Stage 2. The rationale for not starting before is that within the pre-entry sector of education, transition denotes the point of leaving primary, and entering secondary education. We deliberately omitted the inclusion of corresponding ages of students in the diagram. The development of
key areas such as the primary and secondary curricula has resulted, from Key Stage 3 onwards, in a more personalised approach to learning. This, in turn, has brought about considerable institutional changes as far the design and the delivery of curriculum is concerned. Increasingly, secondary schools offer a collapsed Key Stage 3 (two years, rather than the traditional three: form year 7 to 9 to a more condensed year 7 and year 8) which allows for more time, and this flexibility, at Key Stage 4. Over simplistic as the diagram is, it nonetheless highlights that there are a number of points of transition for students in between distinctly different stages and phases of education. We would like to propose, with this paper, that by introducing a L4 module, delivered through blended technologies, embedded in the L3 curriculum, learners are prepared more pro-actively and effectively for study at HE level.

1.3. Working with schools and colleges

In discussions with pre-entry partners a need was identified to explore models of delivery that would take account of pre-entry students’ learning experiences, particularly with a view to the use of technology increasingly employed in schools and colleges. As a result two modules were adapted, under the guidance of the university’s Blended Learning Unit (based at the Institute for Learning Enhancement) as blended modules.

The two modules (Employability Skills and Website Fundamentals) were selected on the basis of these criteria:
- content relevance in terms of the pre-entry curriculum
- technical suitability for blended delivery
- emphasis on skills relevant for transition

This paper focuses on the lessons emerging from the blended HEMiS pilot in relation to students’ aspirations for progression to HE, their sense of preparedness for higher level study and any discernible attitudinal changes. Given the blended nature of the delivery of the pilot we also wanted to investigate any potential benefits for the breakdown of generic barriers to transition.

Prior to the pilot, participating schools were recruited employing the criteria above. Given the nature of the pilot we designed both the cohorts and the delivery methods to provide us with two discreet control groups.

Specifically this related to the form of the delivery, learning profile of the cohort and methods of evaluation. The initial differentiation of the cohorts was ensured through choosing two different online formats for the delivery. Whilst one group was demarcated and taught separately from the main body of students who also studied the module through a discreet “topic” being allocated in the university’s VLE, the second cohort utilised the university’s more reflective e-portfolio as a mechanism for study. The latter group was also not isolated form the larger module cohort. These two different, yet related, approaches were followed for both the delivery set-up and the assessment.

The academic content of the modules vis-à-vis its relationship to the content of the school curriculum also differed, in that one focused on the acquisition of employability and academic skills framed in a personal development context whilst in the other academic skills were embedded in the furthering of subject knowledge. Thus, one might expect different student responses where skills development was a transparent aim of the curriculum as opposed to a by-product of exploring new knowledge in new ways.
The concept of the ‘Independent Learner’, key to student success and academic independence in Higher Education, is developed in students through undertaking higher level study outside the confines of standard school support. The extent to which this concept might be partially fulfilled by completion of a HE Module may also be impacted upon by the approach employed in school to support the cohort, in addition to course content and mode of delivery. This is reflected in the discrete pilot cohorts with different models of entirely independent learning and self-motivated learning versus learning in class time supported by specialist school staff.

Whilst the aim of the pilot was not the evaluation of the efficacy, or otherwise, of either model, we aimed to identify as many factors impacting on students’ motivation and progression, as identified in the research question.

2. What the literature tells us

Whilst much has been written about transition in the context of young people moving form compulsory to post-compulsory education, there is little evidence of defining the term beyond the transactional meanings. Aynsley and Jacklin cite Bathmaker and Thomas as describing transitions as ‘shaped by a range of social and cultural factors’. There appears to be some interchangeability in usage between the terms ‘progression’ and ‘transition’ and we would suggest that further demarcation might be helpful. Whilst ‘early support’ is identified as a measure taken by UK HEIs in the context of Widening Participation (Yorke, 2003), this refers to engagement with (prospective) students immediately prior to commencing their HE course.

Danaher et al described that Australian universities, in response to non-completion statistics, implemented a range of measures that can be loosely summarised under the term ‘first Year Experience’. It seems, therefore, that the term transition is used to denote the period between a student completing one phase of education (secondary) to (or into) the other, i.e. Higher Education.

In analysing historic models of non-completion, Tinto identifies the tensions between personal and systemic approaches. He highlights the strength of organisational approaches by identifying that "the strength if the organizational view of student departure lies in its reminding us that the organization of educational institutions, their formal structures, resources and patterns of association, does impact on student retention" (Tinto, 1987, 1993).

The past decade has seen a “rapid growth” (Vaughan, 2010, p.60) in the number of courses offered in a blended learning format. The reasons for this increased usage of blended methodologies appears to be many and varied, with some theorists citing organisational factors such as the cost and resource benefits or the “connectivity demands of prospective students” (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004, p95). Others cite the teaching and learning outcomes, the pedagogic benefits of utilising technology and the flexibility that it allows for different learning styles as “the traditional classroom training model…can’t meet the learning needs of every individual.” (Wilson and Smilanich, 2005, p.3)

Whilst there is no recognised standard definition of blended learning (Ireland et al., 2009), most theorists identify it as some form of best fit approach that is created by a blending of the ‘real’ and ‘virtual’. It can be asserted that this is partially because of the difficulty in creating an all encompassing definition for the use of blended technologies in learning with variety of practice and interpretation prevalent. The mix of delivery methods vary from case to case, including a package of interactive tools such as VLEs, forums, blogging, e-learning objects,
recordings of lectures, digitised materials, podcasts and vodcasts...a list which is by no means exhaustive. Delivery is characterised by the development of the most effective models with courses commonly sculpted by the feedback and engagement of students, as active participants in curriculum development.

Equally, theoretical definitions of blended learning are often developed with a nod to the situation where it is being used, ergo there are “as many blended learning models as there are organisational challenges” (Banados, 2006, p.534). Definitions used in training will focus on its operational use to achieve specific business outcomes whereas educational descriptors are more likely to highlight the pedagogic benefits and the accommodation of different learning styles.

The progression to technology as a facilitator of curriculum can be seen as a natural response to the development of social or informal technologies and their subsequent integration into the normal practice of education. In the era of web 2.0 and the iphone, some commentators identify the proliferation of these technologies as the driver behind the development of blended and mixed methods models of delivery, rather than highlighting the inherent potential of harnessing these innovations for educations own ends. Sturgess (2008) describes students born after 1982 as the ‘net generation’ and suggests that this ‘native’ technology necessitates curriculum design that fits. Other studies have identified that regardless of whether curriculum is designed around these native technologies, learners will instinctively use technology whether instructed to or not and there is a “sense in which the learner cannot be separated from technology.” (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007, p.22)

Whether technology is the driver for pedagogic development or its usage emanates for the demands of gadget and programme savvy students, the likelihood is that the modern day student’s familiarity with technology exists to such and extent that there is an expectation that it be integrated into learning as it is to life. The proliferation of e-learning platforms (such as Moodle, Blackboard and Web CT) in primary and secondary education means that most students are familiar with technology as a part of learning, certainly in the sense of organising teaching schedules and homework. E-learning and technological innovations are having an impact on learning & teaching in the post-compulsory sector (Littlejohn & Pegler 2007, Golden et al. 2006).

Despite the apparently limitless potential of technology utilisation in the learning experiences of young people, there is some evidence to suggest that this could be impinged by the students’ attitudes. Littlejohn & Pegler (2007) cite a peculiarity that students do not expect learning technologies to overlap with those that they utilise for their own personal ends and there is an expectation that they take the form of formal environments.

Littlejohn and Pegler (2006) identify quality as a motive for blended learning, with the caveat that this quality is often located in data and monitoring scenarios rather than pedagogy. Student experience of a ‘quality’ blended learning experience is also predicated on an appropriate combination of face-to-face and online delivery (Ellis et al, 2005) applied in a relevant context (Seale, 2008) The use of blended technologies have been found to have a variety of effects on undergraduate study where video recordings of lectures can reduce drop out (Olsen 2003 in Wielding and Hofman, 2010), formative tests have consolidated knowledge acquisition and variety allows students to study using their preferred manner (Heaton-Shrestra et al. 2009). Though quality of delivery is key to the success of a blended learning course, ultimately student autonomy and motivation are attributes of the individual learner (Bandos 2006, Klein et al. 2006, Draffan and Rainger 2006) and variation in qualitative experience can be consistent with student performance (Ellis et al. 2005).
Blended learning courses are often more effective than face-to-face or e-learning (in isolation from each other) and “appear to provide learners with the positive features of both classroom and distance learning while minimising the negative features of each” (Hysong & Mannix, 2003, p669 in Klein et al. 2006)

A key element in the majority of studies is on the development of an online classroom community; seen as essential for an effective learning experience (Alonso et al. 2005) and important in first year retention. The ‘recreation’ of a ‘virtual’ classroom community is central to a number of theoretical models related to the blended delivery of learning with Laudrillard’s Conversational Framework and Salmon’s E-Moderating Model identified as desirable models to aspire to. Salmon’s five stage model largely focuses on the online element of delivery and thus, appears to exclude the development of community outside the electronic learning framework.

Encouraging student interaction in e-learning environments presents difficulties with many students reluctant, necessitating action to be taken to foster the development of dialogue and community (Klein et al 2006, Oliver 2005, Vaughan 2010, Salmon 2002). Whilst the development of an online community may be critical in cases where students are engaging asynchronously at a distance from one another but where the cohort is together in a classroom, the necessity may not be present from a student perspective. However there are still benefits to be derived by the academic tutor (learning and course development) and the organisational considerations (e.g. monitoring and tracking engagement). Moore’s theory of transactional distance asserts that online distance is more significant than physical distance in educational transactions. The more structured a course is, the less likely that dialogue will occur thus learning will not deviate to other unexpected outcomes (Moore 1996, in Dron et al. 2004). The impact of structure on interaction is particularly pertinent to blended delivery where it could constrain community in synchronous scenarios.

The rationale for utilising blended learning models varies in cases cited in research. Whilst it was initially thought of as a cost and resource solution to providing education at a distance, there is increasing evidence of adoption based on evidence that it is the best mechanism to deliver results for many students with opportunities to meet the needs of a variety of learning styles.

There is a significant volume of research into how elearning and blended technologies can support students in the compulsory education sector and it features as a key theme of the Year One HE retention agenda. However, the majority of research into VLE and elearning usage with pre-entry students appears to focus on those waiting to enrol at their chosen university. Here, VLE use seems to be focused on familiarization and socialization activities, such as online activities and communication with others (Lefever and Currant, 2010) rather than the development of academic skills for transition.

There is little research exploring the role of the use of blended learning and educational technology with pre-entry students and its impact on transition. However, there are a number of studies that explore the impact in addressing academic and social issues to improve integration and thus retention in the undergraduate population, particularly if taken in the context of wider organizational approaches (Tinto, 1993). Given the focus on the power of technology and blended methodologies to support this transition, it is reasonable to hypothesize that early familiarization with e-learning systems can foster student autonomy, active participation and responsibility for their learning processes. Familiarity with electronic systems combined with their ability to facilitate connection, community and reflection can act as a catalyst for the development of higher levels of thinking (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004).
Technology usage in the blended context can act as a transformational tool in the learning and teaching dynamic and challenges conventional notions of ‘teacher’ and ‘learner’ roles (Banados 2006, Draffan and Rainger 2006, Garrison and Kanuka 2004)

3. **The pilot study**

The rationale for the HEMiS Blended Learning Pilot is defined in the University’s Blended Learning Strategy and departmental objectives to engage further afield partners, in addition to providing an added flexibility to schools and colleges wishing to participate in Level 4 study.

Two different modules were selected for pilot on the basis of their attractiveness to schools as part of a curricular offering where clear benefits could be seen, the existence of a high level of blended learning in the modules, utilisation of blended and e-learning tools (WOLF, PebblePad, electronic collections) and perhaps most importantly, the existence of a module leader with a keen interest in further developing an e-curriculum. Following module selection, module content and documentation was audited and, with the support of the Blended Learning Unit (BLU), recommendations and minor changes were made in order to ensure a best-fit curricular offer. The two modules selected were Website Fundamentals (where students acquired HTML programming and CSS design skills to create a website) and Employability Skills (where students developed academic skills and reflection to create an e-portfolio). The content of these modules was complementary to school curriculum with the Website Module aligning closely with Level 3 iMedia qualification and Employability Skills having association with the development of academic skills for transition and the creation of documentation pertinent to progression to HE or work.

Both modules ran for the duration of a Semester (October 2009 – January 2010), operating a few weeks behind normal University modules to allow for the recording of lectures to synchronize with PowerPoints for distance delivery.

Both pilot modules followed a model of three University visits at the start, middle and end of the course, meeting requirements for student contact time, and included weekly ‘virtual tutorial slots’. Lecture materials were delivered through the University’s VLE (WOLF) or e-portfolio software. Website Fundamentals utilized WOLF, enabling the structuring of weekly lecture materials with formative assessment tools so students could assess their knowledge acquisition. Consideration of child protection issues and scheduling of delivery in relation to the ordinary student population led this cohort to be separated from Undergraduates in e-learning systems, with their own occurrence and WOLF topic established. For the purposes of the Employability Skills pilot, students were integrated with ordinary Undergraduates in systems but in practice, the functional differences of the e-portfolio and the requirement for students to ‘choose’ to share their work with others created an independent cohort.

Student recruitment was undertaken with interested partner schools in three LA areas: Worcestershire, Dudley and Wolverhampton with cohort numbers being determined by the maximum tutor: student ratios advised by the respective module leaders. Twenty seven students were recruited to Employability Skills (59% Worcestershire, 41% Dudley) and 20 to Website Fundamentals (75% Wolverhampton, 25% Dudley). The majority of students who completed the module identified their ethnicity as Asian Indian (65%), with others defining themselves as Asian Pakistani (10%), Black African (10%), White (10%) and Mixed White & Indian (5%). Two students identified that at least one parent had attended university and, of those who identified parental occupation, most identified semi-skilled or manual and routine roles. Of those who completed both modules, everyone passed.
A mixed methods approach was undertaken to evaluate the module pilots, taking into account the differences in delivery mechanism. From the student perspective, evaluation was undertaken by paper and electronic questionnaire, continuous feedback and a final focus group. Questionnaires were scheduled at three key points in module delivery (beginning, pre-assessment and end) with focus group work undertaken following module completion. A holistic approach was undertaken, ensuring engagement with all pilot stakeholders throughout the process including staff in schools and the module leaders within the University. A project based methodology was employed throughout the pilot period with close liaison with staff which afforded continuous feedback and logging and resolution of issues as they arose. A face-to-face evaluation interview was conducted with each staff member (school and University) at the end of the module.

Key Findings:

There were a number of operational issues encountered in the pilot, largely due to the difficulty in applying University systems to a post-16 cohort and the dependence on schools to select appropriate students for the module. This echoes the findings of research into new starters at the institution who find processes and nomenclature problematic (Leese, 2010). Drop out from the Employability Skills Module was most marked and can be partially explained by inappropriate student selection (not ‘self selection’) and the difficulty of identifying the most appropriate stakeholder in school to monitor and support a ‘generic’ module with a student cohort dispersed across school curriculum. Where students were supported by a curriculum member of staff who regularly saw them as a group, completion was 100%.

From a pedagogic perspective, the structure of both modules seemed appropriate for continuing delivery, with the model of three visits deemed suitable by all stakeholders (although there was some suggestion of an additional session or online materials to prepare for assessment in Website Fundamentals). There were some issues with the proposed models of e-delivery which required remedial action to maximize benefits. Students did not utilize the weekly e-tutorial time at all, yet some did suggest that there was a requirement for more tutor contact to excel. The reasons for this seem to be several fold and entwined in the confidence of students approaching their University tutor (greater familiarity may be fostered by more enforced interaction) and the availability of in-school support (who may also be an approachable intermediary). However, it should be noted fostering interaction has proved problematic in many e-learning scenarios with “many content to log in, do the set reading/tasks and log out again” (Dron et al., 2004, p.168) In-school support was identified as key to the success of the Website Fundamentals module by staff and students. Significantly the Website Fundamentals module was delivered in class, meaning that the cohort was often learning synchronously in a centralized location. The benefits of this scenario are demonstrated in student responses which highlight that the support of other students and the importance of their teacher (transitional stakeholder) ensured appropriate monitoring and support for students during the module. The success of this classroom/online delivery model is synergistic with assertions that the development of a “sense of community” is needed “in order for the learning process to be successful” (Paloff & Pratt 1999 in Alonso et al. 2005, p220). The face-to-face interaction between teacher and students also afforded the University Academic ‘someone on the ground’ when required.

Experiential feedback from students indicated conflict over whether the style of teaching and learning was different from that undertaken in post-16 studies. Despite few students suggesting a discernible difference between school and HE attributes in response to direct
questions, qualitative responses identified the requirement for independence in learning and the ability to problem solve with limited support:

“It's the same in that the lecturers tell you what you have to do to complete the project, but then it is up to the individual to complete and carry out the work in their own time ready for the deadline. Whereas, in school the teachers are always telling students to get their work in.” (Student response, Website Fundamentals)

“Basically making me more of an independent person as there weren't many face-to-face sessions, so it resulted in me finding out things and experimenting with techniques regarding my work by myself, which I felt really proud of.” (Student response, Website Fundamentals)

Of those who completed the modules, the quality of the experience was assessed as very high, with students drawing tangible aspirational and academic benefits. In the Employability Skills module, students cited the acquisition of new academic skills which were clearly demarked as ‘HE’ in their consciousness, such as Harvard Referencing and evidencing of work. In the more subject linked Website Fundamentals pilot, student focus was squarely on the acquisition of web development skills with many expressing a desire to further develop their websites and their learning beyond the module.

Student attainment on both modules was high with all completers passing their modules, four with ‘A’ grades. There was some distinction between coursework and time constrained assessment results in the Website Fundamentals module, with coursework grades much higher despite the presence of formative assessment tasks. This appeared indicative of a tendency for students to focus on completion of the academic and lecture materials that enabled completion of coursework, rather than acquisition of the breadth of knowledge required for the most desirable module outcomes. Had the formative tests contributed to module assessment rather than acting as a barometer for progress, the scenario may have been different (Dron et al., 2004).

Reflecting on the module following completion, students identified their teacher and other students as the key source of support rather than the University Academic and highlighted personal and academic skills that they needed to develop in order to facilitate transition to University. These included time management and planning skills “not leaving tasks until the last minute” (Employability Skills Student) and a high level of self-motivation. Completers recognised the value of the experience to their future academic development identifying that they had a better understanding of the expectations of University study.

“I know what to expect at University. I know what the assessments will be like and I know what I need to do to do well.” (Student Focus Group Response, Website Fundamentals)

The pilot of the modules identified a number of implications for future delivery models. Recruitment for future iterations should be from students who are aware of the benefits of participation and are equipped to deal with the expectation that they are self motivated learners. In order to maximize successful student outcomes module developments are to include the incorporation of vodcasts and regular contact between school staff and academics to monitor progress and provide support where necessary. To increase the ‘added value’ of the module, it is recommended that future schemes incorporate transition focused student feedback and the development of a statement for UCAS forms to articulate the achievement of participants.

4. **Discussion and conclusions**

‘Self selection’ was critical in the success of students participating in the HE modules and nomination by a member of staff precipitated attrition amongst the pilot cohort. There were
two significant problems where students had not self-selected: misinformation and workload. Some students were misinformed that the modules attracted UCAS points and had made the decision to participate solely to enhance their HE entry profile, without any reference to course content. Conversely, a cohort from a high attaining school had been selected on the basis of their academic prowess, without reference to the existing high A level workloads or concerns about the impact an additional commitment might have on grades. In order to ensure maximized motivation and retention it is essential that students are fully cognizant of the content and value of courses so that they can ‘self-select’ whilst weighing up all the factors. Similarly, in order to ensure that students are equipped with the right information to make a decision, student centred information needs to be supplied to prevent subversion of messages.

Student responses were most positive and attrition was low where students were able to identify synergy between their in-school curriculum and the module and they were able to see knowledge development as something that they could apply in their current studies. Assuring that tangible linkage exists between curricula has several benefits. The HE experience becomes contextualised and relevant rather than an ‘add on’, it becomes an extension of study rather than an experience in isolation. There are also advantages in universities and schools developing an experiential understanding of curricula similarity and difference, mapping academic content at the point of transition.

The role of the member of school staff was critical to the success of the blended delivery of modules and the outcomes of the students studying on them. Where a member of IT staff in one school supported their students, all students passed the module and facilitation of cohort problem solving occurred away from the university site. Teachers are identified as an important source of IAG in transition decisions and the fostering of HE knowledge within staff should be beneficial.

Students performed best and drop out was lowest where there was a member of staff in-school who was well placed to support and monitor module participation. This ‘transition stakeholder’ was able to monitor student progress and act as a liaison between the University and school, providing support with academic and system related queries. Effective support in-school provided a comfortable conduit between the school and the University and enabled the teacher to develop problem solving expertise and HE knowledge of benefit to his/herself and the cohort. The research did acknowledge that it was easier for staff who had timetabled contact with the cohort to act in this capacity (and thus where the module was subject linked) than where a staff member had no class responsibility for the cohort and no subject interest.

One consistency between the findings of both pilot modules was students’ reluctance to engage with University Tutors. However, it is likely that the reasons for this lack of communication were twofold. The Module tutor for Academic Skills spent time chasing students to remind them of deadlines and ask about their progress whereas communication with the Website Fundamentals cohort was directed through their school tutor. This is identified as symptomatic of many VLE experiences with young people and is identified in literature [source]. Most Website Fundamentals students reported that they saw no reason to communicate with their tutor as they had all the support that they required in class and their own teacher was the natural person to ask for advice. Some also reported that they ‘lacked confidence’ in contacting their University tutor because they did not know him well. Whilst it is reassuring that the students were well supported in school, in order to facilitate effective communication and reduce barriers to transition it is pertinent that students experience a the level of responsibility for academic interaction which will be expected in HE, in order to develop a true HE skillset. Intervention is required to facilitate communication, through tasks and the lessons learned will not just be of use to pre-entry engagement but could inform tutor
engagement in the Undergraduate curriculum, particularly the First Year Experience and retention initiatives.

One common feature of student feedback was the ability to articulate that they had experienced HE but an inability to distinguish between the skills acquired or differentiate them from those utilized in-school. Students were able to discuss pride at being autonomous and solving problems themselves but were unable to articulate a difference in depth of knowledge of application of skills. In order for students to understand the difference in level and gain a full assessment of the HE skillset, they need to be encouraged to compare assessment criteria between module delivery and post-16 studies and, as reflective learner, appraise their skillset against learning outcome statements.

The role of feedback and self-development is critical to the development of an independent learner and HE success. One cohort of students was supplied a grade outcome whereas the other was given a feedback sheet which gave them a grade breakdown and qualitative feedback from their assignments and identified what and how they need to improve in order to achieve in HE. Where students were supplied with a grade they saw that as a measure of success (in terms of ‘pass/fail’) but struggled to articulate where improvement could be gleaned because of their lack of understanding of skills or assessment criteria. Conversely, where students had been given targeted feedback, which assessed them at HE level but appreciated that they were developing skills for transition, they were confident in identifying the required improvements.

**Conclusion**

This paper set out to investigate issues of transition of students from the compulsory sector of education to Higher Education. We were particularly concerned with looking at whether the pro-active engagement with undergraduate curriculum, and modes of study and assessment, would increase students’ levels of preparedness for HE study, as well as the impact on their aspirations. We were particularly keen to see if the blended mode of delivery had a specific and discernible impact.

What this research has shown is that transition is more complex than a transactional interpretation of the concept would first suggest. Employing a twin track approach of blended delivery modes and a curriculum focused, embedded approach has shown where pro-active and positive work may be undertaken collaboratively between pre-entry and HE partners. Crucially, this would move the transition concept considerably beyond what is often described as a deficit model in the first year of university study (Johnston, 2010; Yorke, 2000; Danaher, 2008).

Participation in HE Modules in School can be significant in the development of academic skills for HE in addition to preparing students for terminology, systems and independence. They are a key component in the positioning of transition as a pre-entry issue, not merely a ‘getting up to speed’ and socialisation mission upon arrival as a first year undergraduate. Significant is the potential for early preparation to deconstruct barriers to participation and preconceived notions of what University is like as perceptions are often created drawing on a lack of cultural capital with regard to HE (Leese, 2010). Through participation, students develop a real experiential perspective on HE and their own response to it. Through participation, alien processes and nomenclature can be explored and an experiential understanding can be developed alongside expectations founded in reality.
The utilisation of blended technology as a vehicle for transition skills helps address other preconceptions of HE. The use of a native technology with students, whilst debunking conventions of dusty lecture theatres, delivered a learning experience which was familiar and intuitive. It enabled learning to be undertaken at a time and location convenient for the student. Students all enjoyed using e-technologies as they were able to work at their own pace as information was available to them when they needed it and collated for future reference. E-technologies also allowed students (and staff) to monitor progress and assess knowledge acquisition utilising online formative assessments, which appeared less intimidating (and formal than any classroom based measure). More long-term work needs to be undertaken to explore how prior usage of VLEs and experience of University systems and processes (i.e. learning centres, enrolment), as well as pedagogy, might further support transition, at and beyond the point of HE entry. With more established relationships between the pre-entry and HE sectors, it may be possible to map skills and content at a greater level of depth, to provide a more tangible articulation of what is required for successful transition. This exploration needs to go beyond processes and socialization to drill down to address gaps in pre-entry students’ understanding of the depth of HE learning (Hultberg et al., 2008), assessment criteria (Jessen and Elander 2009) and personal responsibility for learning and communication (Leese, 2010).
Bibliography


This document was added to the Education-line collection on 8 September 2010