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Building bridges: Understanding student transition to university

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Abstract

This paper explores challenges in ensuring effective student transition from school or college to university. It examines the complex liaison needed for students to progress to appropriate courses, settle in to university life and succeed as higher education learners. Secondary data (international literature on transition and the formation of learner identity) are analysed to identify underpinning concepts. Primary data are taken from two studies of student transition in England using student and staff surveys, student focus groups, staff interviews and staff-student conferences that discussed selected project datasets. The paper goes on to offer a model of the process of transition and the formation of learner identity. It proposes that the development of higher education learner identity is essential to student achievement and is initially encouraged where schools, colleges and universities adopt integrated systems of transition. This has clear implications for practice for higher education administrators, academics and quality officers.

Keywords: student transition; school; university; effectiveness; organizational processes; learner identity

Introduction

Student transition to university offers considerable challenges to all the parties involved. Whilst there are some established partnerships between individual schools and universities, students from a particular school or college may scatter to a range of universities. Only a proportion of students leaving schools and colleges transfer to Higher Education (HE), and only a proportion of HE work is undergraduate; both types of institution have other concerns to address. The learner in transition is thus a very small item within a mass system.

For students, the move to university is a personal investment of the cultural capital accrued through school and college education. It is also a

significant social displacement, which may be intensified where the student is mature, is the first in their family to attend university, or is from an ethnic group under-represented in the university population. Schools, colleges and universities work individually and in partnership to enable student progression to degree courses which accurately match their education to date and their aspirations for the future. However, transition involves learners creating for themselves a new identity as a Higher Education student.

Despite the large-scale nature of student transition, the field is under-conceptualised and research into the process is mainly small-scale. Notable exceptions include Pascarella and Terenzini's meta-analyses (1999, 2005) of the broader field of 'how college affects students,' Harvey and Drew's (2006) meta-analysis of transition and Hillman's (2005) longitudinal study of first-year experience. This paper analyses international literature and student and staff data from the North-East of England to conceptualise and model the process of transition to Higher Education. It identifies ways in which schools, colleges and universities can enable new students to develop their learner identity. Through this analysis, the paper aims to enhance institutional learning across the transition 'bridge,' to provide conceptual thinking, and to offer guidelines for university personnel seeking optimal conditions for effective transition and learner success.

Understanding transition through analysis of previous studies

International studies of student transition to university collectively emphasise the interplay between the social and academic circumstances of students and the institutional systems which should support them. It is significant that many recent studies still cite Tinto's seminal work on first-year student success and progression (Tinto, 1987: 139-40).

> (1) Students enter with, or have the opportunity to acquire, the skills needed for academic success
> (2) Personal contact with students extends beyond academic life
> (3) Retention actions are systematic
> (4) Retention programs address students' needs early
> (5) Retention programs are student-centred
> (6) Education is the goal of retention programs.

It appears from the literature that institutions on both sides of the transition bridge are still working out ways of achieving these principles. The discussion below identifies key transition issues, as presented in published studies.

Student expectations

Papers which analyse student expectations, aspirations and decision-making (Tranter, 2003; Smith and Hopkins, 2005; JISC, 2007; Peel, 2000; Longden, 2006; Sander *et al.*, 2000) indicate that students before transfer have difficulty envisaging university life and accurately predicting their student experience. There may be mismatch between the students' pre-transfer aspirations and the reality of their first-year at university (Tranter, 2003; Smith and Hopkins, 2005), which causes difficulty in adapting to HE. Uninformed decision-making regarding students' choice of institution and programme (James, 2000; Hillman, 2005) may lead to withdrawal, or potential withdrawal, from university (Yorke, 1997; Yorke and Longden, 2007). Systems of planned transition, involving liaison between schools and universities to enable better-informed decision-making, are therefore important (Smith, 2002). Pitkethly and Prosser (2001) and Longden (2006) also propose institutional changes in universities, to make the HE experience match more closely the student expectations.

Encouraging potential students

Studies at Monash University demonstrate a 'significant variation in first-year performance according to school of origin that cannot be reduced to either gender factors or Year 12 performance factors,' (Pargetter, 2000: 2). Pargetter indicates how school students can be familiarised with university teaching and learning modes, learn to move independently about the city and its universities, and gain good understanding of course choices; in short, they develop pre-transition the skills and knowledge which support independent undergraduate learning. Newcastle University PARTNERS programme likewise works with school and college learners to encourage aspiration and understanding of HE (Briggs *et al.*, 2009). Activities include campus visits for primary-age children and their parents, residential experience for pre-transition students and information for parents, teachers and advisors. Clerehan (2003) describes how Melbourne University provides HE 'study buddies' for school-age pupils who have potential, but who are unlikely to consider applying to university. In all these cases, potential students are given encouraging early opportunities to start to build a learner identity.

Student diversity

Learner identity is not uniform: in many countries, national policies to extend access to university have changed the nature and needs of incoming cohorts of students. Studies focusing on mature students (Clerehan, 2003; Johnson and Watson, 2004), those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Yorke and

Thomas, 2003), indigenous students and those from isolated locations (Hillman, 2005), students in paid employment (Longden, 2006; Broadbridge and Swanson, 2005), first-generation students (Clerehan, 2003), and simply 'non-traditional' students (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Knox, 2005) all underline the potential isolation and frustration experienced by students who may not fit the university's expectation of them. Yorke and Thomas's (2003) study of six UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) successful in widening participation indicates that universities must be prepared to respond positively on an institution-wide basis, to maximize the success of all their students. They identify as potential success factors:

- an institutional climate supportive in various ways of students' development, that is perceived as 'friendly'
- an emphasis on support leading up to, and during, the critically important first-year of study
- an emphasis on formative assessment in the early phase of programmes
- a recognition of the importance of the social dimension in learning activities
- recognition that the pattern of students' engagement in higher education is changing, and a preparedness to respond positively to this in various ways.
(Yorke and Thomas, 2003: 72)

Learner identity
Support is needed on both sides of the transition bridge to enable students to adjust to university and develop learner identity and autonomy. 'When students begin their first-year at university, they are required to reorganise the way they think about themselves, as learners, and as social beings' (Huon and Sankey, 2002: 1). Adjustment includes making connections between pre-university experience and experience at university (Perry and Allard, 2003), and is enhanced by the opportunity to form positive social relationships with other students and with staff (Johnson and Watson, 2004; Keup and Barefoot, 2005). This process begins before transfer, through visits to HEIs and contact with current students, which enable applicants to imagine what 'being a student' would be like (Briggs *et al.*, 2009), and continues through the early months at university. As Harvey and Drew (2006: iii) note, 'students adjust quicker if they learn the institutional 'discourse' and feel they fit in.' During this initial period, students need to form a sense of their student identity (Huon and Sankey, 2002), and learn to act autonomously as a university student (Fazey and Fazey, 2001), otherwise they will experience disorientation and loss of personal identity (Scanlon *et al.*, 2005). They may feel like 'a fish out of water'

(Tranter, 2003), and be in danger of abandoning their studies. Establishing a positive learner identity is thus an essential factor in persistence and success as a university student. Peer interaction is an important factor in developing concepts of self, which are associated with learning and achievement (Dweck, 1999).

University support systems
Supportive university systems can enable socialization and adaptation. Positive relationships may be established by student guides at induction, student peer coaches (Carter and McNeill, 1998; Pitkethly and Prosser, 2001), staff as course co-ordinators working with small groups of first-year students (Huon and Sankey, 2002; Pitkethly and Prosser, 2001) and improved student/staff ratios in first-year classes (Peel, 2000; Pitkethly and Prosser, 2001). Westlake (2008) advocates using the most student-focused members of staff for first-year students wherever possible. Systems of information-giving, including orientation tours; student handbooks; course outlines with clear statements of aims, objectives and assessment methods; careers information integrated into courses; and information about staff availability are emphasised by a number of writers, notably Pitkethly and Prosser (2001). Evaluations of HE induction indicate that students often experience a burden of information on arrival, and that effective induction should be spread over the first semester, or even the first year. Edward (2003) offers a positive example of intensive activity-based initial induction, designed to introduce the students to the university, the programme, the staff and each other. Keup and Barefoot indicate how student participation in seminars and workshops can sustain this socialization process (2005: 11) during the first year. They report 'students' feelings of personal success at establishing a network of peers, forging meaningful connections with faculty and staff and using campus services.' Drawing on three decades of research on the effect of college on students, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005: 599/600) note the benefit to student learning of 'college environments that emphasize close relationships between faculty and students as well as faculty concerns about student development.'

Learning and teaching in HE
An important sub-set of transition literature engages with the Higher Education curriculum, learning modes in HE and access to HE lecturers and tutors. Assessment feedback is of particular concern when evaluating students' learning experiences: it receives the lowest satisfaction score in the 2005-2009 UK National Student Satisfaction surveys (Canning *et al.,* 2010). Parker (2000: 63-4) poses an 'unthinkable' question about the curriculum itself, 'What in the curriculum is so difficult?

What, exactly, is the core that must be engaged with? What disciplinary skills do beginning students need to develop and what kind of deep, reflective and autonomous learning and mastery can be nurtured?' She responds that the answers must come from teachers, not support staff. Incoming students value the approachability and teaching skills of 'good teachers,' according to Sander *et al.* (2000), and enjoy learning through group interaction rather than formal lectures. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005: 98), defend the formal lecture in their meta-analysis of research, but suggest that 'collaborative and co-operative learning tend to improve knowledge retention.'Chan (2001: 286-7), seeking higher levels of learner autonomy for traditionally 'dependent, reticent and passive' Hong Kong students, found that aspirant autonomous learners preferred small-group activity, involving learning interaction with peers. She comments that Hong Kong students generally find it hard to develop 'the ability to diagnose learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify learning resources, choose and implement appropriate learning strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes - all of which is associated with total autonomous learning.' Hong Kong learners do not differ greatly from learners elsewhere in the world in this respect; autonomous learning as a university student is a difficult, but important goal. The studies indicate that, in forming an HE learner identity, the onus is largely upon the student to adapt. However, a number of writers question the current situation. Summarizing their meta-analysis of literature on the first-year HE experience, Harvey and Drew (2006: v) comment,

> The focus tends to be on first-year students' deficiencies and how to provide for them rather than on exploring their individual learning needs and building on their strengths. Perhaps the key to improving success and persistence is not to focus just on the first-year experience but to improve the student experience generally.

This echoes the aspiration of Yorke and Thomas (2003) that universities must be prepared to respond positively on an institution-wide basis in order to maximize the success of all their students. As Pascarella and Terenzini (2005: 629) note: 'Change in any given area [of student change] appears to be the product of a holistic set of multiple influences, each making a distinct, if small, contribution to the change.'

Investigating transition through empirical study
In seeking to understand student transition, this paper draws on the secondary sources discussed above and on primary data from two investigations carried out in the North-East of England, funded by Newcastle University. The full findings of both projects are available online Briggs *et al.* (2009);

and Clark & Hall, 2010). The *Bridging the Gap* project, reported in Briggs *et al.* (2009) adopted multiple data collection strategies to gain insight into student expectations and experiences from viewpoints on both sides of the transition bridge. Firstly, a synthesis of knowledge about Newcastle programmes to support students in transition was completed. This included an Intranet survey, accessible to all staff, where 19 transition and induction programmes identified. This was followed by a half-day conference attended by 25 admissions staff, to discuss the survey data. Secondly, case studies of four Newcastle University transition and induction programmes were undertaken. This included a questionnaire survey of students who had experienced pre-entry or extended induction programmes. There were 26 students respondents. In-depth interviews were conducted with 4 University staff members. Finally, data collection from students and staff at four Northumberland schools and four North East FE colleges was completed. This data comprised of interviews with 87 HE applicants, including mature students. In-depth interviews were undertaken with 15 school and college staff with roles to support HE transition. Finally, a day conference for Northumberland school students and staff and Newcastle University staff, to present and discuss the analysed data, which was attended by 54 students and staff.

The second investigation, *Exploring Transition: the experiences of students at Newcastle University in their first year*, is reported in Clark and Hall (2010). An online questionnaire was offered to all first-year students at Newcastle University. Themes included in the survey were students' impressions of their first year at university, relevant pre-admission activities, university induction experiences (both initial and extended induction), experiences of teaching and learning at Newcastle University and levels of engagement with their course, peers and tutors. 1,222 students completed or partially completed the survey, which represented a 26.2% response rate. For the second part of this study, focus group discussions were completed with a total of 74 students, using a schedule based on the original survey.

Experiences before and during transition
Raising aspiration – start early!
The Newcastle studies indicate that, for some students, progressing to university is the 'norm;' others may need substantial encouragement, information and guidance before they can imagine themselves applying to university and 'being a student.' For both groups, access to up-to-date information and contact with current university students and staff influence their aspirations positively. *Bridging the Gap* found that young people of primary-school age and their parents are involved in awareness-raising university visits. In contrast, some school courses designated as academic or

vocational, implying university / non university routes, can make it difficult for young people to identify with the aspirations of a different set of learners, and believe in themselves as university students. Programmes which are designed to raise aspiration, enabling learners to visualise themselves as future university students, include visits to schools by university students and staff, but importantly also involve visits to campus by young people, to engage in activities with students and staff on site.

Clear coherent preparation programme

Evidence from both projects indicates that there is normally a 2-3 year school or college programme of preparation for HE. However, not all students understand what is being offered, when and why; students who were interviewed were aware of missed opportunities, and of information being offered at inappropriate times. Good communication is needed to alert students to up-coming guidance opportunities, application deadlines and off-site events. *Bridging the Gap* data indicate three types of preparation activities: *generic,* aimed at raising aspirations of young people that university really is an option for them; *focused,* aimed at students in their final years of school or college, who need help with decisions about whether or where to go to university and *pedagogical* which are subject-specific and offer potential students a *real* taste of university life. All three types of activity have their place in enabling informed commitment to HE study. Open days and residential summer schools were accessible to all *Bridging the Gap* school and college respondents. Those who attended were enthusiastic:

> Us three went to [] open day together. It was pretty cool, just to see everything. … once you get down there it's pretty nice, especially to see the lecturers, one of them looks like Eddie Izzard...

> Summer school helped to make me feel like I was already at university. It gave people the chance to experience student life to the full, and even stay in halls of residence.
> …and they took you to the actual place you would actually be learning in.

Targeted support

Despite the beneficial influence of visits, some students did not attend those which were offered, citing work commitments, reluctance to give up holiday time or the problem of having to arrange visits themselves. Even fully funded residential experience had poor uptake in some schools. For students

to be ready to seek and take up such opportunities, an early start to awareness-raising is essential. The Newcastle University PARTNERS programme, involving 111 partner schools and colleges, offers activities for primary, secondary and further education college students:

- Apprentice students on campus: Years 5 and 6, parents and carers
- Aiming for college education: Year 10
- Student guide to student life and Masterclasses: Year 11
- Talks; summer campus tours; Bitesize Uni; student shadowing: Year 12
- Talks; information evenings; pre-summer school tutorials; assessed summer school: Year 13.

PARTNERS applicants also gain offers of conditional university places; in 'widening participation' areas lower grades are demanded from partner applicants than from others. This was a deciding factor for some:

> I'd never really thought about University at all till last year … the Partners thing was the reason I thought I'd apply. So it's just made it that easier. I was more likely to get in. If the school hadn't come and told us about that I would never have known.

Individual attention
Mature students particularly welcome access to guidance which addresses their individual circumstances. This includes the practicalities of travel, childcare and entitlement to financial support. Information about timetables, including the timing and nature of assessment, is also essential to their decision-making. The chance to talk with current students is invaluable:

> From the perspective of a student who's got children, even just the chance to speak to somebody who's on the course now. … just to see how maybe somebody who is in my position on the course manages with children, doing timetable and school runs and - you don't know where you're heading in that direction.

This kind of information would greatly help all incoming students. They need to know whether they can balance study with paid work, where they can realistically live, and what kind of learning and assessment regime they will experience. Students of all ages say how they have welcomed, or would welcome, one-to-one time with 'someone like me.' As well as accessing practical information, they need person-to-person stories which enable them to envisage managing the difficulties of transition and university attendance, and succeeding in a university environment. Access to student shadowing, or similar one-to-one sharing of university life, can offer this valuable opportunity.

[Bite Size Uni] was really good. I wasn't sure I wanted to go to University until I went on that.

Consistency of staffing and support

A strong message to emerge from *Bridging the Gap* is the need for designated school or college staff who have year-on-year responsibility for HE transition. This person (and their team) would regularly 'push' individual students, from age 15 onwards, to particular transition activities such as open days, student shadowing or roadshows, and would oversee and monitor the HE application process. Applicants were most confident when their supporting staff had a deep fund of knowledge and experience, combined with a wide personal network of contacts with universities and relevant agencies. When staff are new to the process and are not well-informed, students feel under-valued, staff knowledge is not trusted, and students' expectations of success are diminished.

Enthusiasm and encouragement

The positive effect on applicants of interaction with school, college and university staff, students and others who are enthusiastic and encouraging cannot be underestimated. Students tell of one-off encounters with students or staff on university visit days, or of longer-standing relationships with subject teachers or guidance workers which have 'tipped the balance' and enabled them to imagine themselves as university students. This sustains personal self-belief and ambition which helps them to overcome the practical hurdles of transition.

Experiences during and after transition

Creating a learner identity

Exploring Transition respondents offer insight into initial induction: a crucial period for the formation of learner identity. Like many other UK university students, Newcastle students experience both the social programme of Freshers' Week and Induction Week, which introduces the university campus, its systems and services, and the nature and content of their academic programmes. This can result in induction overload, with students at times having to choose between different types of activity. Students value Freshers' Week as a time to meet new people and have new experiences, although some find the prevalence of alcohol-related events off-putting. However, they note the relative lack of events which bring students and staff together on a course related basis. It seems that the two purposes - social and academic - could be more closely combined.

For *Bridging the Gap* respondents, living independently, managing finances and relating to a new set of people is often seen as a bigger

challenge than studying independently. They are concerned about achieving the balance between academic activities and other aspects of university or family life, including paid work. Just as generic, focused and pedagogic activities are all enabling pre-transition experiences, the practical, social and academic aspects of adaptation during the induction period are inter-woven, and all are vital to successful transition to university.

Relating to other students and staff

Personal encounters are essential to forming HE learner identity pre-transition; similarly positive contacts with other students and staff help to sustain and build identity during and after transition. Evidence from *Bridging the Gap* points to the beneficial effect of extended induction programmes, which enable staff and students to meet and get to know one another, for students to familiarise themselves with their new environment and to enable personal contact with tutors on a group and individual basis throughout the first semester and at strategic points such as revision and exam periods.

Both studies indicate that students value a supportive environment, which may require more personal contact from tutors. One of the few negative factors for *Exploring Transition* respondents is their lack of personal contact with staff. Although students give 90% positive ratings for their overall university experience, and 94% positive ratings for the general friendliness and approachability of staff, only 47% say that lecturers and tutors value their contribution, 35% say they know a member of staff well who is not their personal tutor and only 5.7% report having discussions with teaching staff outside lectures. The focus groups reveal contrasting experiences, indicating that closer working relationships with staff would be valued:

> We have a tutor session every week and spend an hour with him every week, so I know my tutor really well and in that respect it's really well set up.

> There are over 100 people doing our course so we don't have seminar work, and your personal tutor doesn't know you, and your lecturers don't know who you are unless you go to them and say this is me, this is how I work, this is what I need help with.

Learning in HE

Most school and college *Bridging the Gap* respondents experience a range of learning activities before transition, from whole-group teaching and note-taking led by a teacher, through group discussion or investigation, to independent study. Most perceive that they will have to learn more independently at university: whilst all have heard of lectures, and expect to be in large

lecture groups, they lack understanding of seminars, lab classes, field trips, small-group work and individual tutorials. Some students look forward to learning more independently, and feel that they are developing the necessary skills.

Despite the varying levels of interaction with their lecturers described above, practically all *Exploring Transition* survey respondents (97%) rate the teaching quality on their programmes as good. Students also rate highly other aspects of their teaching and learning experiences; for example, there is strong engagement with course-related ICT learning systems. Feedback on coursework is less highly rated, with only 64% agreement that course feedback is helpful. As with difficulties over student-tutor contact, this may indicate high student-teacher ratios.

A small number of mainly younger students (16%) indicate that they have considered withdrawing from their courses. Most respondents, though, are often or always happy (88%); 72% feel part of a group; 76% feel settled. Only 64% of students often or always feel a sense of belonging. While this is over half of the sample, one is left wondering whether this percentage could be higher, and whether learner identity is secure for all students.

The pair of projects reported here cannot touch upon all of the aspects of transition covered in the published literature. They do, however, identify important factors which enable the growth of student identity.

1. Aspiration to be a university student, preferably starting early in life
2. Imagining oneself realistically as a student
3. Clear, reliable systems of support leading up to HE application
4. Support from school, college and university targeted to the individual
5. One-to-one encouragement
6. Access to university students and staff pre-entry
7. Access to a range of pre-university experiences for applicants and their families
8. Induction activities which combine social and academic purposes
9. Class activities which encourage interaction with staff and other students
10. Sustained programme of induction to encourage 'belonging'
11. Interaction with university staff during the first year
12. Help in developing independent learning skills, pre- and post-entry.

Conceptualising transition through modelling
Through analysis of the literature and the research data, this study has identified fundamental organizational influences which enable the growth of learner identity: influences which are under the control of university administrators and academics and their school and college contacts. Non-organisational

influences, such as family, peers and community, are not investigated here and may act powerfully in congruence with or opposition to these factors. In order to identify and model the relevant factors, the abstracts, introductions and summaries published in the literature were subjected to concept analysis, as were the interview transcripts from the empirical research. These concepts were synthesized, classified and arranged into models, using the arguments presented by the literature and the data. David (2001: 462) points out that a model has 'two complementary indissociable functions': a function of 'abstraction, based on reality', moving from reality to the model, and a development function, a 'means of action', which moves from the model to reality. In capturing the nature of underlying processes, models offer the user a tool for setting up hypotheses and for considering the effect of changes to the system being modelled (Briggs, 2007). In this study, the modeling process enables us to identify underlying principles to support effective student transition.
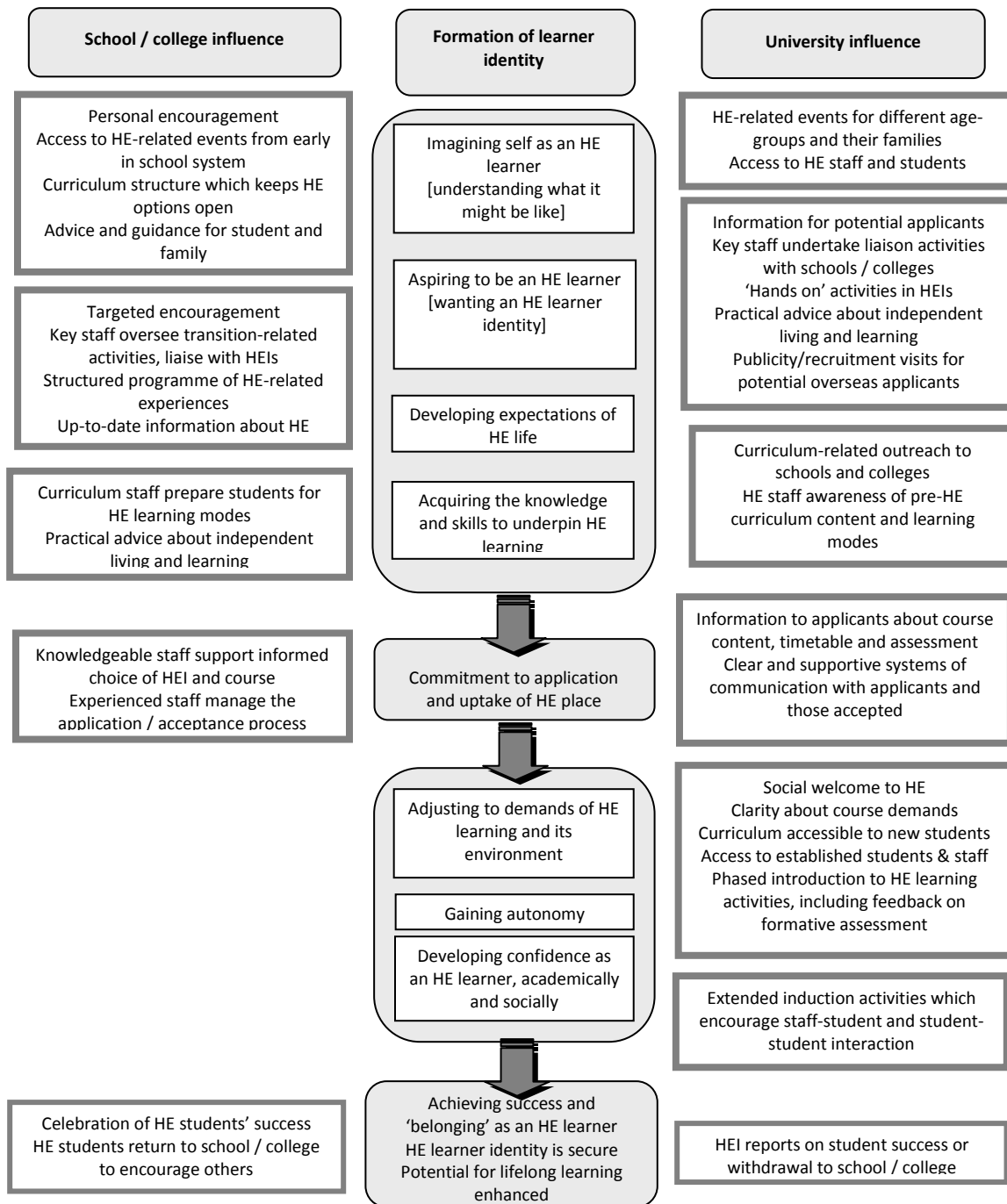
Figure 1 draws together the analyses of secondary and primary data to map the formation of learner identity, and to indicate transition-related actions on the part of the school, college and university which can enable each stage of the process.

The concepts relating to the growth of learner identity develop through the central column of Figure 1: the student imagines and aspires to be a university student, and acquires HE-related skills and knowledge. This leads to commitment to apply and take up a university place. On arrival, the student adjusts to the university environment, develops HE learning skills, acquires confidence and autonomy, and finally achieves success and full self-identification as an HE learner, and potentially as a lifelong learner. The organizational influences in the left- and right-hand columns support the growth of learner identity, and this study indicates that these attitudes and activities are vital elements of successful systems of support for transition. Figure 1 is presented as a positive system; however, it should be noted that learner growth can be influenced positively or negatively by interaction with peers and teachers, by open or closed opportunity, clear or misleading information and whether or not the learner is being treated as an individual within the complex system of transition. Figure 2 models the process further, reducing the factors to their essential concepts.

The process of forming identity is not purely sequential: the various elements of development (for example, aspiring to HE and acquiring knowledge about it) may reinforce each other, and some processes may need to be repeated. The organizational influences upon growth, however, are remarkably similar on both sides of the transition bridge, and may be summarised as:
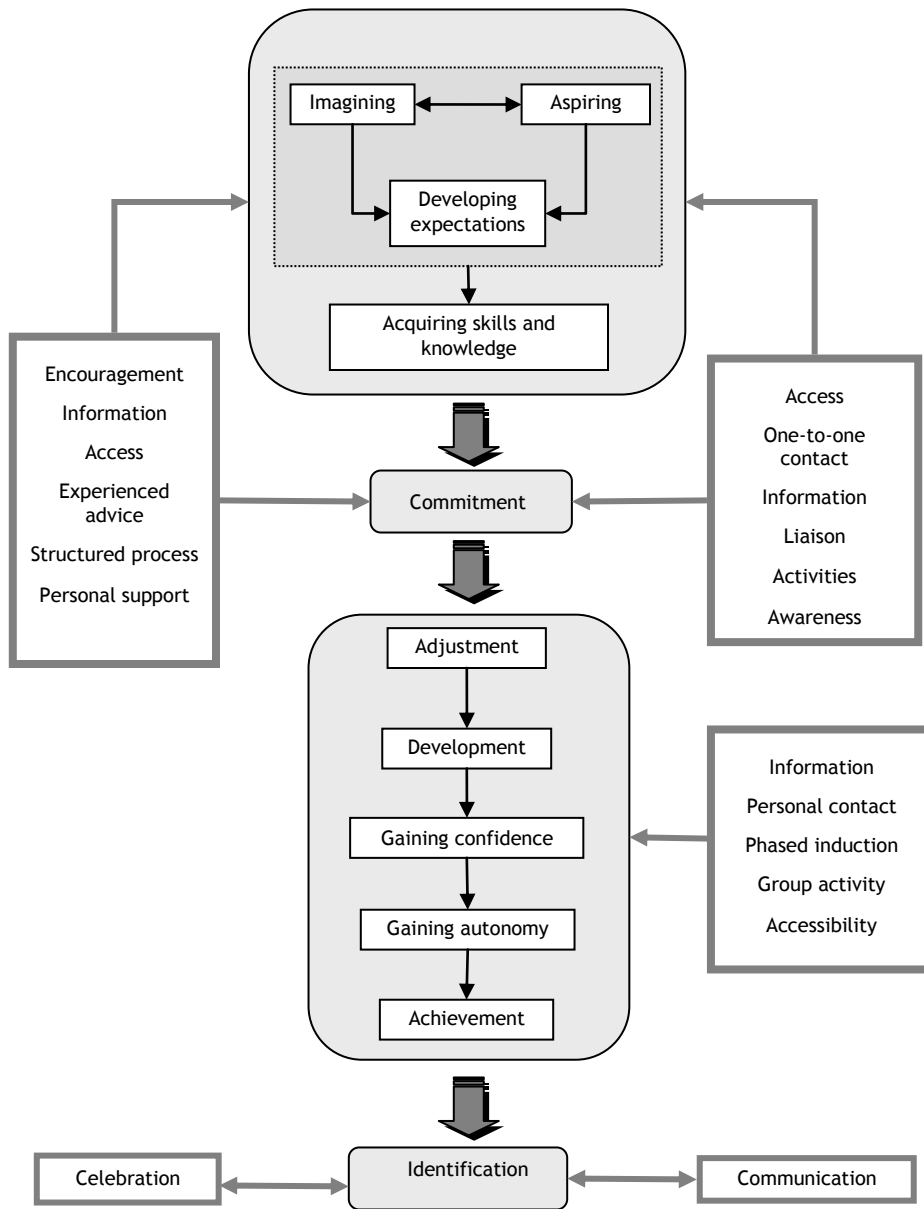- personal contact
- multiple opportunities

- clarity of structure
- apposite information
- accessibility of people and curriculum
- purposeful liaison
- awareness of the individual within the process.

School / college influence	Formation of learner identity	University influence
Personal encouragement Access to HE-related events from early in school system Curriculum structure which keeps HE options open Advice and guidance for student and family	Imagining self as an HE learner [understanding what it might be like]	HE-related events for different age-groups and their families Access to HE staff and students
Targeted encouragement Key staff oversee transition-related activities, liaise with HEIs Structured programme of HE-related experiences Up-to-date information about HE	Aspiring to be an HE learner [wanting an HE learner identity]	Information for potential applicants Key staff undertake liaison activities with schools / colleges 'Hands on' activities in HEIs Practical advice about independent living and learning Publicity/recruitment visits for potential overseas applicants
Curriculum staff prepare students for HE learning modes Practical advice about independent living and learning	Developing expectations of HE life Acquiring the knowledge and skills to underpin HE learning	Curriculum-related outreach to schools and colleges HE staff awareness of pre-HE curriculum content and learning modes
Knowledgeable staff support informed choice of HEI and course Experienced staff manage the application / acceptance process	Commitment to application and uptake of HE place	Information to applicants about course content, timetable and assessment Clear and supportive systems of communication with applicants and those accepted
	Adjusting to demands of HE learning and its environment Gaining autonomy Developing confidence as an HE learner, academically and socially	Social welcome to HE Clarity about course demands Curriculum accessible to new students Access to established students & staff Phased introduction to HE learning activities, including feedback on formative assessment
		Extended induction activities which encourage staff-student and student-student interaction
Celebration of HE students' success HE students return to school / college to encourage others	Achieving success and 'belonging' as an HE learner HE learner identity is secure Potential for lifelong learning enhanced	HEI reports on student success or withdrawal to school / college

Figure 1   Transition as a system to support the formation of HE learner identity

Figure 2   *Model of organizational influence on the development of learner identity*

These are concepts which underpin Tinto's (1987) seminal 'principles,' and they could usefully form the basis for developing indicators of a supportive climate for learner development. They are congruent with the aspirations of Yorke and Thomas (2003), that institutional climate should be perceived as 'friendly' and be supportive in various ways of students' development, and that institutions should be prepared to respond positively to the changing pattern of student engagement in Higher Education.

Implications for practice

This paper offers valuable insights for Higher Education administrators, academics and quality officers. It proposes that the development of HE learner identity is essential to student achievement, and is initially encouraged where schools, colleges and universities adopt integrated systems of transition. The seven concepts identified above are fundamental to achieving the 'holistic set of multiple influences' indicated as necessary by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), and could be used as principles for evaluating systems of student transition and induction.

Specific findings from this study indicate that, whilst still in school or college, potential students benefit from access to:

- timely up-to-date information, encouragement and one-to-one support concerning university entry
- activities which enable learning about HE
- knowledgeable advice and guidance through the application process.

These features suggest closer co-ordination between school / college and university personnel systems than are normally achieved at present. Once the student is within the university system, their period of adjustment is enhanced by a phased induction process which may extend through the first year and through the provision of information, personal contact, formative feedback on progress, and group activity which enable learning and reinforce belonging. Where student achievement is communicated back to the school or college, this is encouraging to future applicants.

Despite the complexity of the organizational processes involved, a clear message to emerge from *Bridging the Gap* and *Exploring Transition* respondents is that they want to be treated as individuals, not as an item in a vast system. This view is supported particularly in the mass of small-scale studies in the literature. Many of the students involved are still growing to adulthood; those who are already adults are moving from one mode of living to something very different. These processes in themselves present challenges, and individual contact is crucial in enabling students to identify their own strategies for growth, and to find their own way to a new identity. Even within the organizational web of school college and university liaison which is necessary for student transition to HE, both primary and secondary data in this study have shown that this human touch is possible: the challenge to those managing university systems is how to achieve it.

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