

LTC09D082

Transitions Project University of East Anglia

Progress report no. 3: January to December 2009

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1. Introduction

As part of its learning and teaching strategies, the University of East Anglia (UEA) has set up a project to investigate the 'first year experience' of both undergraduate and taught postgraduate students. The project is financially supported by the Higher Education Funding Council for England for three years (2007-2010) under the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF). Members of the Transitions Project Board can be found at Annex A.

The 'Transitions' Project links directly to UEA's learning and teaching 'quality enhancement' and 'equality of opportunity and widening participation' agendas "*to ensure an effective transition for all new entrants into undergraduate and postgraduate courses through a major review of approaches to first year teaching, learning and assessment and student information, advice and guidance*". This report highlights to the Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC) the project successes and activities during the year January to December 2009 and is the third project progress report. (First project report considered by LTC on 6th February 2008 and second project report considered by LTC on 4th February 2009).

2. Summary of successes

Over the last twelve months the 'Transitions' Project has continued to work with academic and administrative staff in UEA Schools, Faculties and central divisions and with groups of undergraduate students. This year the 'Transitions' Project also turned its attention to the postgraduate taught student experience to raise awareness of the transitional issues and academic challenges this community of students face.

A successful undergraduate pilot peer guiding project took place during the 2009 spring semester in the School of Mathematics (MTH). The scheme:

- helped with student understanding of the module topic (Analysis);
- helped with the cohesion of MTH students across year groups;
- increased opportunities for first year group working and communication skills;
- provided student peer guiders with opportunities to improve their communication and employability skills, confidence levels, mathematical knowledge and understanding and the ability to tackle challenging and unfamiliar problems / situations.

One student peer guider made the comment "*These sort of sessions teach us skills we don't usually get to learn as maths students. Much more varied than the usual lecture, seminar, exam style*". A first year who appreciated the sessions commented "*The group leaders [peer guiders] were easy to talk to and definitely helped my understanding of the course*".

The School observed an increase of 10 percentage points in the average coursework mark over the previous year.

A pilot 'Introduction to university life: a student experience day' for prospective local Faculty of Social Sciences students took place on Thursday 25th June 2009. The theme 'the global financial crisis' linked together a lecture given by Dr. Vanessa Sims (LAW) followed by a group seminar and informal sessions about the library, life outside of studying and personal budgeting.

The importance of the postgraduate taught student experience was brought to the fore by the introduction of the Higher Education Academy's PTES survey (Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey). The survey ran for three months from April to July 2009 and identified that the top three motivational factors for studying at UEA are the:

- institution's reputation in chosen subject area;
- location of the institution;
- reputation of the department.

Overall satisfaction with the quality of teaching and course experience scored highly, 83.5% and 85.4% respectively, and are above the National results.

Over the past year the project has also encouraged and contributed to:

- first year undergraduate curriculum discussions;
- discussion and active projects to engage first year undergraduates with their studies;
- engagement activities with prospective students from local schools and colleges;
- the development and inclusion of employability skills within the curriculum;
- discussion and the awareness of PGT transitional issues.

3. Making a difference: a review of project activities

The 'Transitions' Project is an active research project, working collaboratively with UEA Schools, students and individual academic and administrative staff. Transitional issues are identified and responded to with practical activities and research to help evaluate solutions and implement change supporting the teaching and learning community at UEA.

3.1 Reviews / surveys

(i) Student withdrawal survey

Following a pilot surveying students who withdrew from UEA in 2006/7 an updated survey has been sent to 2007/8 and 2008/9 student s who withdrew. This progress report is too early to identify significant findings from respondents. Data input and analysis is currently ongoing.

(ii) Postgraduate taught programmes – induction review

The 'Transitions' Project reported on this review last year. The recommendations made to aid the programming of a consistent induction experience for all PGT students were considered by the Deans of Faculty Administration and put into practice appropriately within Schools.

(iii) Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES)

The Higher Education Academy launched a new national Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey. Similar to the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), it was designed to help institutions enhance the quality of postgraduate taught degree provision by collecting feedback from current taught postgraduate students on aspects of their experience including assessment and feedback, learning resources and personal development. The 'Transitions' Project Officer acted as the PTES Survey Officer co-ordinating UEA's participation. The survey was piloted between April and July 2009 and received a 12.8% response rate. The Survey Office was able to determine some statistically significant findings with this response rate exploring the relationship between the six measures of course quality with overall satisfaction ratings. The measure of correlation was used to determine very strong positive relationships between variables. The coefficients for quality of teaching and learning (0.828) and for contribution to students' skills and personal development (0.708) are both particularly high. As might be expected, as ratings of quality of teaching and learning increase, ratings for overall satisfaction with the course also increase. Structural equation modelling was used to identify the strongest predictors of overall satisfaction with the course and have been interpreted by the Survey Officer as follows:

"The more attention paid to improving quality of teaching and learning on a course and the greater students' perceptions are that the course is contributing to their skills and personal development, the higher their overall satisfaction with the course will be. This interpretation may be obvious. However, what the model provides is unequivocal

mathematical evidence to inform the maintenance and improvement of high quality taught postgraduate programmes.”

3.2 The undergraduate student experience

(i) Induction

The 'Transitions' Project continued to champion the induction process. The Project Officer prepared and collated induction materials for a SSF induction meeting and shared the resources with the Faculty Associate Deans for Teaching and Learning. The following points were made for consideration when planning induction programmes:

- structure a clearly defined week – eradicates appearance of confusion of seemingly unrelated tasks;
- provide a warm welcome – verbal and written in induction pack;
- promote community – provide a welcome for each level of community;
- balance activities –balance formal administrative processes and periods of inactivity with social, welcoming, informative activity;
- promote social interaction – use activities to inform and promote good communication and foundations for social interactions;
- discuss student expectations – explore through the explanation of the differences between A-level study and University;
- use student buddies and Academic Advisers – to help with social interactions and the development of communication during campus tours / introductions to School / Faculty / Peer group;
- create inclusive activities – involve students who live off of campus / mature students / students who do not drink etc.;
- implement direct entry induction – provide activities for direct entry students and those on exchange or visiting programmes e.g. a meet and greet programme;
- plan induction as an ongoing process – especially for skills development in context of learning e.g. plagiarism when an extended piece of writing has been set;
- build confidence with building blocks – set a piece of work or group activity over the first week to help a peer group bond and work together but remember that the novelty of being with new staff and new peers may militate against achievement of significant learning;
- be aware of information overload – open days welcome potential students with attention, warmth and friendliness but the reality of day one may be a stark contrast to this with administrative rituals and activities providing a surfeit of information;
- ask yourself 'so-what'? – question what you are doing / planning and the benefit the student will gain from it. Can information be offered at a different time? Have we provided opportunities for social and academic integration? Have we identified and supported those particularly at risk from finding the transition hard? Have we put in place induction activities for direct-entry / visiting students? Have we put a longer term induction process in place for the development of independent learning skills?

(ii) MTH peer guiding pilot project

As reported in the 'Summary of successes' section the 'Transitions' Project, in collaboration with MTH and DOS, applied for and won a UEA Teaching Fellowship to pilot an undergraduate student peer guiding project for 1C14 'Analysis and Algebra'. The scheme specifically aimed to:

- enhance the quality of the student learning and teaching experience, particularly for the first year students;
- support the success and progression of all the students involved in the pilot. to help students to present themselves with confidence;
- improve student communication skills;
- help students feel more confident in tackling unfamiliar problems;

- and more generally build students' confidence through the development of a broader range of graduate employability skills.

The 'Transitions' Project Officer trained the student peer guiders with the Maths Learning Enhancement Tutor through a series of workshops, role play, observation and feedback sessions. The peer-guided sessions were timetabled for one hour each week during the spring semester. Nine groups of first year students (totalling 87 students) were each assigned to a pair of peer guiders (2nd to 4th year students).

General observation and discussion with the peer guiders highlighted the following:

- the timing of the sessions greatly affected attendance; groups sandwiched between other timetabled lectures and seminars achieved the highest and most consistent turn outs;
- the space in which the sessions took place affected the activity level of the group; the larger and darker the space the lower the activity and energy levels;
- peer guider personalities and interactions contributed to the group character and level of activity;
- peer guiders spent a fair amount of their own time preparing for the sessions;
- peer guiders were not confident enough to act as if they did not know the answer when asked a question and often adopted a teaching role rather than reflecting questions back to the group to encourage discussion;
- first year students were slightly reticent to speak up but peer guiders reported growing confidence levels within their groups.

Module evaluation collated feedback from first years. Two thirds of responses were positive reporting sessions to be helpful to understand module content. The average Analysis coursework mark rose to 68.25% compared to 58.51% last year. The final peer guiding feedback session provided evidence for achieving the scheme aims and persuaded the School's Director of Teaching and Learning to fund and run the scheme again in 2009.

(iii) Academic practice day

A draft proposal was presented to members of the RAMP (now STAR) group during their meeting held on 6th March 2009 for an 'academic practice day' for local year 13 students, holding conditional and unconditional firm offers from UEA. The day was designed to introduce prospective university students to academic practices and teaching/learning scenarios at university such as lectures and seminars and finding resources in the library. The day was intended to be both active and informative, helping prospective students think about their expectations of studying at university and the skills and experience they would be bringing with them. It was hoped that such a day would alleviate worries or concerns about coming to university through a practical 'day in the life of a student' approach. Members of RAMP discussed the proposal and it was agreed to pilot the idea within one Faculty. Dr. Vanessa Sims, the Associate Dean for Admissions in SSF, volunteered.

A pilot event 'Introduction to university life: a student experience day' took place on Thursday 25th June 2009. The day was given a general theme 'the global financial crisis' which encompassed the interests of all SSF School disciplines and linked together a lecture given by Dr. Sims followed by a group seminar and informal sessions to find out about the library, life outside studying and personal budgeting.

A small pilot group of thirteen prospective students attended. The day was considered a success by those that delivered the sessions however it was felt that the event would work better as a conversion tool for prospective students earlier in the academic year.

The 'Transitions' Project Officer reported back to RAMP and recommended that the event was taken forward as a conversion tool earlier in the year by other Faculties. The STAR executive considered the pilot event and the options for taking it forward and decided that it should not go ahead due to their current priorities at that time of year.

(iv) Student essay competition

The student essay competition ran for a second year, this time asking students to write a letter of application and prepare their CV in response to a job advert. Each applicant was given the opportunity to attend an appointment with a UEA Careers Adviser to help with future applications and CV writing. The winner was first year undergraduate student Rebecca Wiles studying International Development presented with a £100 prize by the pro Vice Chancellor (Academic). It has been agreed that the essay competition this session (2009-10) will be extended to postgraduate taught students.

(v) Mature student induction day

The 'Transitions' Project Officer managed and facilitated the mature student induction day held on 15th September 2009. Over 100 mature students attended effective learning and study resource sessions and had the chance to question current mature students about any aspect of university life. The event successfully helped to ease worries about study and enabled mature students to meet each other before their programmes began.

3.3 The postgraduate student experience

Following successful project activities at the undergraduate level, the 'Transitions' Project was interested in exploring the PGT student experience at UEA. Schools were invited to consider issues surrounding the PGT experience and take part in collaborative pilot projects with the 'Transitions' Project. An invitation briefing document was sent to Heads of School and PGT Programme Directors providing a brief overview of the PGT market and outlining possible questions and issues for consideration. Current UEA PGT registration HESA return figures for 2006-07 to 2008-09 are presented in the table below.

Mode of study	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09
Full-time	1493	1605	1669
Part-time	609	607	668
Total	2102	2212	2337

Source: <https://www.uea.ac.uk/acad/po/planningmanagementinfo/factsfigures>

Four individual PGT Programme Directors raised interests. Each interest was followed up by the Transitions Project Officer, as reported below, but unfortunately, none has yet had scope or time to pursue a collaborative pilot project.

(i) School of Computing Sciences (CMP)

One question posed in the invitation briefing asked 'What is the international PGT student experience like? How do language barriers affect their learning in an intense academic environment?' The mixed cultural background of CMP's PGT intake caused Dr. Beatrix De La Iglesia, PGT Director, to consider the induction process. A review of the induction programme took place and the 'Transitions' Project Officer shared good practices from across the University and introduced new ideas for icebreaker activities. A formal induction evaluation form was created to support the ongoing review of the induction programme each year. The evaluation form can be accessed as part of the suite of online induction resources.

<https://intranet.uea.ac.uk/services/students/Staff/induction>

Concerns about how to support new students' English language skills were passed to Dr. Anna Magyar, the learning enhancement tutor specialising in the written academic issues international postgraduate students face.

(ii) School of World Art Studies and Museology (ART)

Dr. Dan Rycroft, MA in Cultural Heritage and International Development Programme Director, was interested in how to support the exit of his students from the course. The 'Transitions' Project Officer advised the MA students on the development, organisation and facilitation of a forum event for current students and alumni. It was hoped that the day might stimulate the formation of a specialist support network within the cultural heritage and international development sector. Alumni came back to share their

experiences of working in the sector, each presenting their career path as a case study. The Careers Centre was informed of the event and is keen to assist with events in the future if students required support for growing the network and activities.

(iii) School of Environmental Sciences (ENV)

Dr. Alan Bond was interested in the relationship between international students and plagiarism cases. Plagiarism was being detected in one in every six pieces of assessment from international students. This raised the questions 'Was it only more obvious in assessment from international students because of the language used? Was there a way to design assessments in order to factor out the plagiarism issue?' A discussion with Dr. Anna Magyar, learning enhancement tutor, led to the collation of a useful list of resources and the following advice:

- set early activities that help students to deliver / display their understanding in compliance with assessment expectations;
- start with setting shorter texts with plenty of clear guidance e.g. subheadings / structure to build confidence and help students progress to a piece of extended writing in English;
- ask students to do some of the research, identifying appropriate sources;
- provide a small number of readings to base a written assessment on;
- talk to the School of International Development which has also been looking at the issue.

UEA's plagiarism site

www.uea.ac.uk/plagiarism

The Plagiarism Advice website

<http://www.plagiarismadvice.org>

'Deterring plagiarism through course design' Jude Carroll

<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/teachingnews/archive/autumn05/tips.html>

Video: Jude Carroll on plagiarism

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/pesl/resources/moduledesign/judecarr898/>

'Systems for the production of plagiarists: developing countries and use of plagiarism detection systems in UK universities' by Niall Hayes and Lucas Introna

<http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/files/sdaw/5708.ppt>

Lancaster University Management School web page on a student diversity and academic writing project

<http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/departments/owt/Research/sdaw/resources/>

(iv) The Norwich Business School (NBS)

NBS is home to a significant percentage of the total UEA PGT students within their MSc and MBA programmes. Prof. Roland Kaye wished to establish a more substantial credit bearing induction programme addressing study skills at graduate level. He was also keen to determine how best to assess competence in English. A NBS induction programme needs to form a firm basis for graduate level study and should help to 'normalise' students' study approach to UK academic practices. The 'Transitions' Project Officer undertook a review of current, internal and external, graduate induction models, practices, resources and competency frameworks. The resultant investigative paper will feed into the review of the MSc family of programmes.

(v) PGT handbook and dissertation guidance review

PGT handbooks and dissertation guidance booklets were collated. The content and quality of the information was reviewed to feed into the work of a small working group. As a result the 'Transitions' Project Officer drafted a dissertation process / timeline template as a possible PGT resource. The resource is being reviewed by the working group and is therefore not currently available for School or student use.

4. Sharing experiences and good practices

The 'Transitions' Project has continued to share good practices and teaching and learning experiences both internally and externally within the wider Higher Education community, as the following activities show.

4.1 Teachers' conference

A one day conference hosted by UEA provided an opportunity for the 'Transitions' Project to present a poster sharing first year student transition and learning experiences. The poster served as an immediate visible means of sharing messages from students:

- the importance of understanding the skills and learning required at university;
- the importance of learning time management;
- understanding how to learn independently;
- managing student expectations of teaching when students first arrive;
- motivating students through feedback and good contact with advisers.

4.2 UEA teaching and learning day

The MTH peer guiding pilot team presented a poster and session at the 2009 UEA Teaching and Learning Day in collaboration with the pilot postgraduate peer mentoring project. The pilots served as examples of good practice and the opportunity to share the successes and lessons learnt with interested colleagues was greatly rewarding and beneficial. There was much interest around how peer guiding might work in other Schools to help students develop personal skills, build confidence and tackle challenging modules in a new way.

4.3 Peer mentoring workshop

Attendance at a one day workshop held at De Montfort University helped to share good practices from the MTH peer guiding project across the sector with those piloting peer mentoring programmes. Valuable feedback, discussion and ideas were taken away from the event.

4.4 QSN student engagement symposium

The student engagement symposium, organised by the Quality Strategy Network, provided the 'Transitions' Project an opportunity to share and explore both current and future ideas to improve student engagement.

4.5 Sharing experiences within UEA

This year the 'Transitions' Project has continued to participate in and share good practices with the following internal working groups:

- the Higher Education Research and Innovation Group;
- the Taught Programmes Policy Group;
- the review of CCS and academic year group;
- the review of examinations and course tests group;
- a pilot A-Level scientific literacy course;
- a signage and way-finding workshop.

5. Project development

The 'Transitions' Project has successfully helped to raise awareness of the importance of the postgraduate taught student experience across the University through the introduction of the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES). The University has committed to repeating the survey in 2010 with responsibility being passed to the Assistant Registrar (graduate students).

A growing need for the provision of learning support mechanisms for PGT students is leading more Schools to think about peer guiding / mentoring, induction and study skills programmes at this level. The 'Transitions' Project will continue to support projects in these areas.

A further development will be an investigation into a university-wide peer support scheme. The idea is being discussed with the Dean of Students' Office International team, the

Students' Union and the Graduate Student Association. Scandinavian case studies and student led support communities at UEA will provide a basis for the investigation.

A further focus will readdress the feasibility of a UEA skills award in collaboration with the Careers Centre. With the introduction of CV builder and increasing good practices across the higher education sector it is hoped that current research will determine the sector position on such schemes and the pro and cons for both institutions and students.

A final summary project report will be presented at the end of the 'Transitions' Project in July 2010.

6. Conclusion

The 'Transitions' Project has continued to show how an institution can respond to current debate and research on a theme such as the student experience. The engagement of undergraduate students with their studies has continued to be an important issue. Schools and Faculties have begun to tackle the issue with their own ideas and research including:

- setting work pre arrival for discussion during induction;
- establishing smaller groups and having more frequent group work;
- using academic staff to deliver first year modules;
- encouraging and developing reading skills;
- use of earlier formative assessment and feedback;
- managing first year expectations;
- building confidence through setting smaller writing exercises before an essay;
- development of social learning spaces;
- online resources to support self-directed learning;
- numeracy support;
- introductions to exam techniques;
- peer support schemes;
- consideration of making part of the first year count.

The wealth of student satisfaction data from the National Student Survey supports and contributes to the undergraduate experience discussion, research and activity. The supporting evidence base from which to consider changes to the PGT student experience (PTES) is in its infancy and thus appetite to consider issues and participate in pilot projects as part of the 'Transitions' Project is not as great at present. Considering the current economic climate and annual increases in PGT student registration numbers, the sector will be paying more attention to the experiences of this student body. Building up the evidence base through PTES should therefore be UEA's priority at this time.

The 'Transitions' Project Officer would once again like to thank all the administrative and academic staff who have been so positive and enthusiastic about the project, together with the Transitions Project Board for constant advice, guidance and support.

Appendix A

Transitions Project Board

Dr. Annie Grant Dean of Students

Professor Geoff Moore Director of Taught Programmes

Ms. Alison Rhodes Head of Learning, Teaching and Quality Office

Project Officer

Ms. Anne Vallins