

LTC09D138

## Transitions, into and within Higher Education, Project Final Report 2007 - 2010

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## **(i) Preface**

This final report for the Transitions, into and within Higher Education Project (here after known as the Transitions Project) highlights the broad range of activities that have taken place over the last three and a half years. The theme 'Transitions' was identified by the Director of Taught Programmes who recognised there was a job of work to be done within the University to help students with the new academic challenges higher education presented both at the Undergraduate and Postgraduate level. The Transitions Project was also an ideal vehicle to respond to sector wide debate and research on the student experience and student engagement.

The Project delivered a timely programme of practical activities and active research pilot projects that focussed on both the student learning experience and academic teaching practices. These included:

- learning and teaching debate;
- changes to teaching methods;
- changes to student learning approaches;
- listening to and acting on student feedback on their learning experiences;
- restructuring and developing the teaching and content of study skills, mathematics and literacy skills modules;
- engaging with and building connections with local high school networks;
- gaining a better understanding of students' educational backgrounds;
- improving induction programmes;
- providing opportunities for students to improve their employability skills;
- sharing experiences and good practices internally and externally.

The Project has been able to highlight and share good practices internally in both student learning and academic teaching methods. Working jointly with the Higher Education Academy, Aimhigher, Higher Education Institutions and other external organisations and professional bodies the Project has broadened awareness of transitional issues.

In addition to running activities and events the Project has helped the Institution examine key policy areas including academic advising, non-academic discipline and student retention.

## **(ii) Acknowledgements**

The Transitions Project Officer would like to thank all of the students and staff at the University of East Anglia who have supported, collaborated and taken part in Transition Project activities and events. Enthusiasm for the project has been greatly valued and has helped with the development and success of initiatives across the whole of the Institution. In particular, thanks go to Dr. Harriet Jones, Dr Shaun Stevens, Dr Becky Fraser and Mr Jonathan Lerner in the Schools and to Dr. Helen Webster, Dr. Robert Jenkins and Dr. Anna Magyar in the Learning Enhancement Team. The Transitions Project Officer would also like to thank Professor Geoff Moore, Dr. Annie Grant and Ms Alison Rhodes, the Transitions Project Board, for their constant advice, guidance and support.

The Project has been a wonderfully varied experience. The Project Officer is very grateful to the University for the opportunity to have worked with so many different Schools and central departments in such a unique way.

# 1 Introduction

The Transitions Project was launched in 2007. It formed part of the University's learning and teaching strategy, financially supported by the Higher Education Funding Council for England under the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund. The Project took forward the University's 'quality enhancement' and 'quality 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".*

Although focusing on the student experience, the Project had a broad remit working collaboratively with Schools to look at student engagement, motivation, attitude, preparedness, expectations and study skills.

A great number of pilot projects, activities and events have taken place over the past three and a half years. Particular aims were to understand:

- student expectations, on entry, of higher education and university life;
- current skills levels and academic issues concerning new undergraduate students;
- ways in which to support Schools wishing to develop and evaluate their first year curriculum in terms of embedding skills;
- student support systems in terms of skills development and advice.

The 2007, 2008 and 2009 Annual Progress Reports have disseminated information on Project activities, which included wide-ranging reviews of:

- induction;
- the undergraduate first year academic experience;
- the postgraduate student experience; and
- the provision of academic and non-academic support.

Particular highlights of the Project have been:

- the introduction of peer-guiding to support the academic progress and personal development of both undergraduate and postgraduate students;
- the completion of a review of the Academic Advisory System;
- introducing Disability Officers in Schools;
- the development of online induction resources;
- the introduction of the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey.

This final report summarises how the Project has informed policy and practice at the University, how it has supported the Institution with both undergraduate and postgraduate transitions and ways in which good practices have been promoted.

## **2 Informing policy and practice**

The Transitions Project has fostered thinking, debate and review of current teaching and learning policies and practice across the University.

### **2.1 Student induction**

The Transitions Project has had an important role in influencing the development of induction practices for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. The process of conducting undergraduate and taught postgraduate induction reviews actively encouraged all Schools to consider the format and functionality of their induction programmes. A survey of new students also identified desired improvements to the induction process and information provided in the first week.

A presentation at the University's annual Teaching and Learning Day shared good practices around induction and encouraged further thinking about the idea of pre-induction; activities and / or information that can be shared with new students before they arrive.

The Project has produced a useful set of induction resources collated from good practices from across the University. These are available on the University's intranet site and in particular an induction framework provides a template / guide to help Schools develop a consistent induction experience for new students.

### **2.2 Academic advising**

The Transitions Project, together with the Dean of Students and the Director of Taught Programmes, played a key role in the review and development of the Academic Advising policy. Working with the Senior Academic Advisers, the review refined the role and responsibilities of Advisers and their involvement in student module enrolment and other academic processes.

The review process identified the requirement of a new Disability Officer role in Schools based on the Plagiarism Officer model. Forming a network of key contacts across the University was important for the central Disability Coordinator to disseminate core information reliably and quickly.

The review also recognised the benefits of centralising the annual review of School Advising Systems. The survey is now administered by the Survey Office. Over time cumulative results will also provide a strong evidence base to inform future developments to the Advising System at the School level.

A new set of leaflets, disseminating information about the Academic Advising System, have been published. While the primary audience for the information is Advisers, leaflets have been produced for a broader range of academic and administrative staff to promote understanding of the Academic Adviser role.

### **2.3 Withdrawal survey**

An annual survey of withdrawn students, developed by the Transitions Project in 2007, asked students for information about their learning and social experiences at UEA and reasons for withdrawal.

In collaboration with the Project Officer for the Review of Assessment, a combined report on student withdrawal was presented to the Learning and Teaching Committee in 2010. HESA information examining our rates of student continuation, transfer and drop out together with the withdrawal survey data was combined to better understand why students withdraw from their studies at UEA. The report was influential in deciding to set up a working group to look specifically at the withdrawal process, the guidance given to students and a reliable data collection method at the point of withdrawal.

### **2.4 Dissertation guidance**

The Project identified a requirement for clearer postgraduate dissertation guidance. In collaboration with the University's Learning Enhancement Team a review of taught postgraduate handbooks and dissertation guidance booklets led to the development of a dissertation 'timeline template' for use by taught postgraduate students.

### **2.5 Course review**

The Project contributed to the review of several undergraduate first year programmes across the University. The Project Officer informed discussions on teaching and learning practices, the structure of the curriculum and embedding study skills within the curriculum.

Engaging students with their study was the driving force behind this work. Advice and guidance has encouraged Schools and Faculties to consider the first year experience of their students more carefully. Changes to first year teaching and learning activities have included:

- 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 through induction talks;
- 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 towards the degree classification.

## **2.6 The taught postgraduate student experience**

The Transitions Project submitted a proposal to the Pro Vice Chancellor (Academic) to request the University's participation in the Higher Education Academy's new national Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey piloted in 2009. The survey was designed to evidence the assessment and feedback, learning resources and personal development experiences of postgraduate taught students.

The long term potential of the collated data for enhancing the quality of postgraduate taught degree provision at the University was sufficient for the Learning and Teaching Committee to agree to continue the University's participation in the Survey again in 2010.

## **2.7 Higher Education Research and Innovation Group**

In 2008 the Transitions Project Officer was invited to join a 'think-tank' on first year student engagement. The Project Officer contributed through sharing both internal and external good practices. This information added to the creative thinking of the group, informing practices with innovative ideas and new dynamic approaches from across the sector. This working group has been able to bring the University's attention to a range of successful teaching and learning practices and continues to work raising new issues to tackle that hope to optimise student engagement and the student experience.

## **2.8 Debate**

The Transitions Project played an important role in stimulating debate and drawing on current good practices to provide input to internal and external debate.

The first Science Faculty Transitions Symposium at UEA, organised by the Transitions Project, brought together representatives from each Science School to exchange ideas for teaching basic literacy and numeracy skills to first year undergraduates. The Norfolk Education Advisory Service was also present to inform staff of the gaps between A-levels and higher education.

A one day conference, themed on transition issues for scientists, hosted by the UEA was organised the Higher Education Academy in conjunction with the Transitions Project. This presented a fantastic opportunity to UEA staff to showcase their teaching and learning research to a broader audience within the external higher education sector. Both informative and investigative, through workshop activities, UEA delegates were able to plan and develop their own strategies to assist students with the transition to university through improved induction practices, managing expectations and trying different methods of teaching mathematics, literacy and study skills.

## **2.9 A student competition**

The Transitions Project launched a new student writing competition as part of its annual activities. The idea was not only to provide an additional opportunity for students to practice their writing skills, but also to collate competition entries to produce an interesting resource for Schools to use. Students' entries highlighted good teaching and learning practices and helped Schools to understand different transitional processes their students go through.

### **3 Supporting the Institution with undergraduate transitions**

The Transitions Project was the University's principle vehicle for supporting the Institution in their commitment to enhancing the student experience. The aims of the Project were to provide practical resource and time to pilot projects across the Institution that would benefit students and help with transitional issues.

During the lifespan of the Project all Faculties and Schools either participated in discussions or consulted the Project on practical ways in which to motivate, engage and influence academic behaviours in their first year undergraduate students.

General advice was given on:

- understanding students' academic backgrounds;
- bringing forward induction activities;
- creating smaller student working groups;
- the need for early formative feedback;
- providing more opportunities for personal development;
- ways in which to encourage the development of writing and reading skills;
- ways in which to incorporate and embed study skills within the curriculum;
- supporting students experiencing difficulties with maths.

Specific projects were set up to support Schools with their individual requirements. The following provides a summary of these Project activities.

#### **3.1 Student expectations**

The Transitions Project worked closely with the School of Biological Sciences to understand their model of first year undergraduate teaching: introducing students to higher education highlighting the differences from secondary/high school and helping to manage expectations; streaming students for maths and literacy upon entry; group work; core first year staff creating close contacts and relationships between the staff and students.

#### **3.2 Study skills**

The Transitions Project provided support and guidance for a new module 'Study and Research Skills in Higher Education' developed by the School of American Studies. Assisting the module tutors, the Transitions Project Officer helped students during their first week at UEA to explore the transition they had just made, discussing their expectations, motivations and aspirations and encouraging the development of strategies for self-supported learning and independent thinking.

Following the School's evaluation of the module it has become a compulsory first year module.

### **3.3 Student engagement**

The Transitions Project explored student engagement and expectations with the School of Allied Health Professions (AHP). A first year undergraduate workshop facilitated by the School's Problem-Based Learning Facilitators and the Transitions Project Officer gave students the opportunity to provide feedback on their learning experience. A report of the findings helped the School to address and/or implement:

- problems arising from the size of Problem-Based Learning groups;
- repeated learning outcomes;
- the need for more active writing exercises;
- the use of academic facilitators as chargs for the first Problem-Based Learning session to reduce role ambiguity and increase their level of involvement to try and sense when groups need to move on faster;
- changing facilitators at the start of the second semester to help examine group dynamic issues.

### **3.4 Personal development skills**

In consultation with the Transitions Project, the School of Mathematics piloted an undergraduate peer guiding project with specific aims to enhance the quality of the student learning and teaching experience, particularly for the first year. The project helped to support the success and progression of over 100 students involved.

A group of second to fourth year Maths students put themselves forward to become peer guiding facilitators with the aim to:

- be more able to present them-selves with confidence;
- improve their communication skills;
- feel more confident in tackling unfamiliar problems.

The pilot was run in a first year core module that students typically find challenging.

Facilitator training sessions, run by the Learning Enhancement Tutor (Maths and Statistics) and the Transitions Project Officer, comprised 'being a facilitator' workshop and peer guiding role-play sessions.

The pilot project was a success and has now been internally funded by the School and run for a second year. Successful outcomes include:

- higher level of student understanding of 'Analysis' – the module topic;
- cohesion of Maths students across year groups;
- facilitators improved their communication skills, confidence levels, mathematical knowledge and understanding and their ability to tackle challenging and unfamiliar problems.

### **3.5 Student progression**

An electronic survey gathered student views on the transition from Year 0 to Year 1 of the Science with a Foundation Year degree programme. As a result, a number of steps were put in place to support student progression. Progression routes and requirements were made more transparent. Students were notified as early as possible as to whether they could transfer onto a single science discipline degree in Year 1 or whether they were to remain on the general science degree programme. Those remaining on the Foundation degree programme in Year 1 were to receive appropriate induction information and help with timetabling their programme module choices across the Science Faculty.

### **3.6 Scientific literacy**

As part of a working group the Transitions Project Officer contributed to the development of a course to help A-level pupils improve their scientific literacy skills. The seven week course was run as a pilot at two Norfolk schools with aims to:

- assist students in the transition from school to university;
- provide skills that will help pupils A-levels;
- make school pupils aware of skills they will need when at university;
- introduce school pupils to the literature produced by staff at university and the literature that drives the academic process;
- show pupils the processes involved in academic research and the process of disseminating information to different audiences at the university level;
- make pupils aware of assessment and feedback processes at university;
- ensure pupils to be prepared and practiced in essential skills.

The course was evaluated by the pupils and is now being developed more broadly to be delivered across all subject disciplines in Norfolk schools.

### **3.7 Academic practice day**

The Transitions Project organised an 'academic practice' day for local year 13 pupils, holding conditional and unconditional firm offers with the Faculty of Social Sciences at UEA. The day was designed to introduce prospective university students to academic practices and teaching/learning scenarios at university such as lectures and seminars. The day also included informal sessions to find out about the library, life outside studying and personal budgeting. The day was both active and informative, helping prospective students form expectations of studying at university in connection with the skills and experience they would be bringing with them.

### **3.8 Student anxieties**

The Transitions Project Officer supported the mature student induction days each year, talking to new students about their anxieties and issues around becoming a mature student. Each year over one hundred mature students attend effective learning and study resource sessions and have the chance to question current mature students about university life. The induction days successfully ease worries about study and enable students to meet each other before their programmes begin.

### **3.9 The transition out of university**

The Transitions Project worked with the Careers Centre to develop a one day workshop 'getting on with your humanities degree'. The aims were to:

- address the issue of getting students to recognise their skills;
- help humanity students articulate the skills they are acquiring through their degrees;
- see the value of work experience.

The Project Officer shared a personal employment case study, setting out a scenario from which participants were then asked to carry out various job tasks in groups. The second half of the workshop helped students to identify and articulate the skills they had used in a format that employers were looking for.

## **4 Supporting the Institution with postgraduate transitions**

Turning its attention to the postgraduate taught student experience, the Transitions Project helped to raise awareness of the transitional issues and academic challenges this community of students face.

All Schools were invited to consider issues surrounding the postgraduate taught student experience and to take part in collaborative pilot projects with the Transitions Project. The following provides a summary of these Project activities.

### **4.1 English language skills**

Concerns about how to support English language skills were raised. Language barriers are an immediate problem in a fast paced postgraduate academic environment. In collaboration with the Learning Enhancement Tutor for international and postgraduate students, the Project worked with the School of Computing Sciences to support and assist understanding with the specific academic writing skills the students were facing.

In addition, the School was helped to consider their postgraduate taught student induction process. The Transitions Project Officer undertook a review of the induction programme and shared good practices from across the University, introducing new ideas for icebreaker activities for groups of students from mixed cultural backgrounds.

An induction evaluation form was created to support the ongoing review of the programme each year and now forms part of the suite of online induction resources.

### **4.2 Career development**

For the joint Cultural Heritage and International Development Programme, supporting the exit of students from the course was the issue raised. 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 work experiences, each presenting their career path as a case study.

### **4.3 Plagiarism**

The School of Environmental Sciences 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.

#### **4.4 Postgraduate level study skills**

The Norwich Business School was considering whether or not to establish a more substantial credit bearing induction programme that would help to form a firm basis for graduate level study. Key aims would be to help 'normalise' students study approaches to UK academic practices and identify how best to assess competence in English. The Transitions Project Officer undertook a review of internal and external graduate induction models, practices, resources and competency frameworks. The investigative paper fed into the review of the MSc family of programmes.

## **5 Promoting good practice**

The Transitions Project has listened carefully to Schools, Faculties, students and individual academics to help shape policies and teaching and learning practices across the University. By specifically sourcing examples of successful practices through reviews, surveys, events and one-to-one discussions the Project Officer has been able to disseminate effective strategies for managing student expectations and manage the quality of the student learning experience through pilot project work. The Project has provided opportunities for the Institution and individuals to work together internally and externally to share and promote good practice. As well as being responsive to the needs of the Institution, the Project has also tried to promote innovative practices from other parts of the sector.

### **5.1 Local school community**

The Centre for Staff Educational Development together with the School of Biological Sciences and the Transitions Project formed a working relationship with the Norfolk County Council Secondary School Strategy Unit and the network of ten local specialist science schools. Meetings helped share and promote practices in teaching and assessment methods, mathematical and literacy skills teaching and study skills development. Teaching and learning expectations were also shared from both the A-level and higher education perspective.

### **5.2 Higher Education sector**

The Transitions Project has successfully helped to promote good practices related to the first year undergraduate experience across the University through Teaching and Learning Day presentations, annual progress reports, face-to-face meetings, internal working groups, workshops and training days. Projects activities identified core themes of interest including student engagement, confidence, aspirations, motivations and attitude to learning as well as an earlier focus on employability in the first year. The work of identifying good practices has now been channelled into the work of the Higher Education Research and Innovation Group at UEA in order to assist the University in determining a dynamic and focused approach to the first year.

Externally, the Project has promoted UEA's good teaching and learning practices through conference attendance, poster presentations and workshop presentations, as well as through personal contacts with the Higher Education Academy, external academics and school teachers.

### **5.3 Resources**

The Project has shared many good practices found during the course of activities through publishing documents on the Learning, Teaching and Quality Office and Student Services intranet pages. Three annual progress reports have helped to promote the diversity and interest in teaching practices at UEA. The full set of activities and related documents are also available online via the Transitions Project Portal organisation.

## 6 Learning for the future

Student engagement and the student experience continue to be popular research themes and focus for debate across the higher education sector. They have been, and remain, the current focus for the Teaching Fellowship awards at the University of East Anglia. The Transitions Project was a timely activity and therefore sat comfortably in this research and debate focused environment.

The Transitions Project approached most of its work through debate and practical activities. Both of these methods helped to create a level of activity and knowledge from which a greater awareness of transitional issues could be raised. By not defining or restricting the boundaries of the Project, its work was able to move freely between topics, themes and disciplines. This open model of working ensured interested and enthusiastic staff could be listened to at any time. Project work, in the form of piloted activities, was allowed to rise and fall, in terms of the level of activity, to fit with staff availability and other resource pressures. Conversely, the Project Officer acted as a continual resource for activities during pressurised times.

The Project had the freedom and time to nurture academic enthusiasts through assisting, supporting and resourcing their student transition based ideas through to fruition. Project networking activities also enabled the Project Officer to foster working relationships between others across the Institution. This way of working helped Project activities gather their own momentum. This in turn helped to raise awareness of transition issues more widely encouraging others to reconsider teaching and learning practices and curriculum design.

The Transitions Project highlights the importance of individuals and their enthusiasm for pedagogic research within an institution. Practitioner experiences can have a real impact on their immediate academic environment and peers if given the right support, platform and opportunities. The Transitions Project highlighted, shared and raised awareness of a handful of these individuals. There are many more however and many newly inspired individuals, for whom hopefully the path will have been made easier to tread in order that they might help to: ease the transition to university for their students; improve the student learning experience; help their students become more engaged academically; support their students through difficult academic and personal circumstances; and improve the overall student experience.