

## **Book Review**

**Kyndt, E., Donche, V., Trigwell, K. & Lindblom-Ylanne, S. (eds.) (2017) *Higher Education Transitions: Theory and Research*. London: Routledge.**

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This is a well organised treatise despite having more than forty contributors. A minor quibble is that the title might have been more specific because the content focus is students' transitions, rather than those of staff or, indeed, whole higher education (HE) institutions. The book enriches previous publications on the topic by going beyond the institutional and social consequences of students failing to complete their courses or being unable to find employment after graduation. It provides a balanced educational overview of the topic in which empirical case studies reveal students' emotions and behaviours during the transition process itself. The book is divided logically into three sections and so gives equal weighting to: a) transitions into HE; b) transitions within HE; and c) transitions from HE into the workplace. It is part of a series published in conjunction with the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction and so has a European focus. That being said, it does contain ideas applicable in other settings.

The first section of the book initially outlines Nicholson's (1990) model which considers transitions as involving four phases: a) preparation; b) encounter; c) adjustment; and d) stabilisation. This provides an excellent framework underpinning the entire text. More specifically, the point is then made that widening participation in HE has exacerbated the 'transition shock' experienced by some when they enter HE and, to fully understand how this shock might be minimised, both students' personal traits, and their former and current learning environments need to be examined. Factors that have been associated with first year success include previous academic achievement, appropriate study behaviour, being a mature student and, in many studies, being female. However, what are the emotions and behaviours underlying these factors, and how might those disadvantaged be best supported? These questions are addressed in this section from a variety of perspectives by six case studies that identify self-regulation, identity, fear of failure, and appreciation of course expectations as key psychological drivers. The authors propose that small steps, including both targeted interventions and overall changes to induction procedures and communication strategies, are needed to generate a positive, nurturing learning environment where students have the opportunity to form new

social relationships, discuss their fears and change their ways of learning to ones that are more appropriate to HE. In short, student identities need to be fostered to enable them to exercise greater agency in their learning. It was noted that the ready availability of learning support services can be reassuring even to those students who do not access them. Furthermore, providing choices of topics at an early stage could help students to amalgamate their previous knowledge with new HE learning.

The second section of the book considers the least studied aspects of educational transitions; those encountered within HE. Transitions within HE are becoming increasingly important for particular student groups for a number of reasons. These include the increased likelihood that students will move from one degree programme to another, the greater opportunities for students to study outside their home country, the increase in vocational degrees involving work placements, and the greater prevalence of modular degrees in general. The one qualitative and four quantitative case studies in this section highlight the need for greater understanding of students' perspectives of their journeys through higher education. At present, it is notable that many of the factors, emotions and behaviours influencing transition into HE remain prominent when considering transitions within HE. Of particular importance is that first year students who engage weakly with their studies continue to do so in later years and fail to develop the deep, critical and self-regulated approaches needed to undertake investigative research and writing. This section of the book thus provides a clarion call for more research into the concept of *transition as becoming* within HE, but, based on our existing knowledge, the authors also advocate the use of interactive teaching methods and group work to foster engagement, reflection and identity development. As a particular matter of concern, the authors also highlight the reduction in student engagement in all disciplines as they transition from the first to the second year of traditional three year undergraduate degree programmes.

The third and final section of the book considers transitions out of HE into the workplace. No matter how vocational their degree, it is unlikely that any graduate's attributes will accurately match those required by their new employer, and, although they may have been trained within HE to become lifelong learners, students' learning contexts change when they enter employment. The two qualitative and three quantitative case studies in this section consider workplace requirements, student competences and suitable HE learning environments to facilitate a smooth transition into the workplace. No matter what their discipline or employment role, graduates who successfully negotiate the transition into the workplace are likely to possess self-efficacy, good metacognitive skills, self-confidence and, for many roles, leadership qualities. Possibly through work experience, they are also likely to have an understanding of the workplace role they are about to undertake. To develop students' work competences and metacognition the authors encourage HE tutors to foster social-constructivist learning environments that incorporate collaborative open-ended project and problem-based learning together with individual reflection concerning the workplace value of acquired competencies. Students should also be

made aware that useful competencies can be developed through non-academic activities such as volunteering and travel i.e. learning does not only take place in the classroom. It is crucial that the suggested changes to teaching practice are extensively implemented in HE programmes because graduate employability has become a critical factor influencing students' choice of HE institution, and there is no reason to believe this will change in the near future.

Overall, this book contains important messages for HE tutors, managers and student support staff. It also calls for further qualitative and quantitative studies concerning the role of student peers, family members and others as sources of support during HE transitions, and it notes that HE transitions outside western cultures remain under researched. The messages in the book may not be novel, but the thorough educational perspective taken makes the arguments more powerful and more likely to stimulate organisational change. It is notable that students can be highly stressed at times of HE transitions because they often occur simultaneously with other major changes such as becoming financially independent, moving accommodation or making long-term relationship choices. At these times HE tutors can help by increasing students' self-knowledge through feedback generation that goes beyond their academic grades to consider their study processes. Anyone with even a passing interest in the current Brexit negotiations will know how unsettling transitions can become and how empty superficial discussions can sound. The Brexit process has produced both resignations and fierce arguments within the UK government. Perhaps similar fate awaits UK universities unless they manage student transitions carefully?

### **References**

Nicholson, N. (1990). The transition cycle: causes, outcomes, processes and forms. In: Fisher, S. & Cooper, S.L. (eds) *On the Move: the psychology of Change and Transition*. Chichester: Wiley.