The Transitional Experiences of Sport and Exercise Students from Further to Higher Education

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Abstract

Many students will transition into higher education (HE) from further education (FE) at the start of a new academic year. This large student body is progressing from a sector that provides largely vocational based qualifications which aim to 'up-skill' students, whilst working towards meeting industry requirements. Therefore, it is imperative that students progressing to an academic HE environment make as seamless and successful transition as possible between the educational sectors. This article investigates the experiences of sport and exercise students transitioning from a FE college (FEC) to an undergraduate degree course at a post-1992 HE institution (HEI). The study aims to identify students' thoughts, feelings, and experiences during the transitional process, thus providing an insight into improving the retention, achievement and student satisfaction of future students. The findings identified four key themes: distinct academic differences; effective interventions, advice and guidance; negative feelings associated with transition; further improvements required for the transitional process. These findings enabled a series of practical guidelines to be synthesised to inform other post-1992 universities and FEC's on how to further manage and support student transition.

Key words: Higher Education, Further Education, Transition, Retention, Student Satisfaction, Post-1992 University.

Introduction and Context

According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2015), 1,533,855 students were enrolled on Higher Education (HE) courses in 2013/14, whilst there were 2,929,600 students participating in Further Education (FE) in the same academic year (Skills Funding Agency, 2015). Based on these figures it is logical to surmise that a percentage of these students will transition into HE from FE at the start of a new academic year. This large student body is progressing from a sector that provides largely vocational based qualifications which aim to 'up-skill' students, whilst working towards meeting industry requirements. Therefore, it is imperative that students progressing to HE make as seamless and successful transition as possible between the educational sectors.

To ensure that a successful student transition is achieved students must make many adjustments, specifically adjusting to different teaching styles, learning with greater autonomy and preparing for a range of assessments (Jessen and Elander, 2009). This is not an exhaustive list and many holistic factors will also affect the transitional experience and what students may encounter in their journeys. In some instances, the transition is a partly managed process through the use of taster courses, or preparatory module (Knox, 2005; Jessen and Elander, 2009). However, in most instances this process is something that the student has to undertake independently and with little support. This transitional period is pivotal to a student and can have a considerable impact upon the student continuing their studies and flourishing in a new academic environment. Therefore, from an institutional perspective, a managed transitional process by HE institutions (HEI's) may ensure that there isn't a negative impact upon the retention statistics of courses following the first year of study in HE. If it isn't managed effectively then the potential result could be that students drop-out of university, thus reducing retention and ultimately both student achievement and student satisfaction can be affected negatively. These factors are benchmark themes by which universities are increasingly being measured, therefore, it adds credence to the transitional phenomena being fully explored. Furthermore, FE colleges (FEC's) have a role to play in the process too, as they should ensure that they are preparing students for the next stage of their development, whether that is employment or progression to HE.

Despite the large-scale nature of student transition, the field is under-conceptualised and research investigating the process is mainly small-scale (Briggs, *et al.*, 2012). Noteworthy research includes Bogdan and Elliott (2015) and Pike and Harrison (2011) research on the transition of direct entrants to the HE system and their thoughts, feelings and perceptions of the process.

This research investigates the transitional experiences of students studying on sport and exercise degrees at a post-1992 HEI to further conceptualise, and model the process of transition to a specific HE student cohort. The aim of the research is to

identify students' thoughts, feelings, and experiences during the transitional process, thus providing an insight into improving the retention and student satisfaction of future students. The findings will enable a series of recommendations to be made on supporting and improving the transitional process, which will be beneficial for HEI personnel who aim to manage the transitional process, providing optimal conditions for effective transition to increase retention, and ultimately increase student satisfaction. The findings will be of relevance for HEI's who have a large intake of students from FEC's, particularly the post-1992 HEI's and those with sport and exercise related provision. Furthermore, the findings will serve as a guide to prepare FEC's on the transitional process that their students will undertake when they progress to the next tier of education.

Literature Review

Jones (2008) believes it is important to not only be able to access university but also for students to be able to succeed too. Much of the emphasis in the UK HEI's regarding success has been on the retention of students on degree courses and their success in an allotted time frame (Jones, 2008). Whilst this is vitally important to the success of students, and to a large extent the success of the HEI's, there are many other factors involved with the retention and success of students, many of which can be linked to the transition that a student encounters when progressing into HE (Pike and Harrison, 2011; Bogdan and Elliott, 2015). The transition of students to HEI's is an expanding research area (Pike, 2008; Pike and Harrison, 2011; Bogdan and Elliott, 2015), despite still being relatively in its infancy (Penketh and Goddard, 2008; Pike and Harrison, 2011). Particularly the progression of students from a FEC to a HEI due to the differing nature of the courses. FEC's largely deliver vocational courses to upskill students and prepare them for employment, however, should students progress to university they will be transitioning in to a largely academic environment (Hatt and Baxter, 2003). Hatt and Baxter (2003) believe that traditional A-level students are more suited to an academic environment, whilst those coming from FEC's, from an increasingly widening background (Armstrong, 2015), will have different skills, expectations and experiences, which will be in stark contrast to the traditional A-level entrants'. Research conducted by Johnes (2006), and much earlier by Spady (1970), and then Tinto (1975), on student 'wastage' and retention identified that the main reason for non-completion of academic courses was students' academic ability and their educational experiences prior to starting university. Further supporting the notion of a contrast between different educational systems, such as vocational and academic systems, which are adopted in FEC's and HEI's respectively. However, the dynamic nature of the transition to HEI is more complex that just the academic aspect of the students courses. Due to the diverse nature of the existing literature, the research that underpins this transitional process

will be explored and outlined below in four sub-divided categories: Exploring and Understanding the Transitional Process; Interventions to Support the Transitional Process; The Transition of Specialist Demographics; Subject Specific Transition.

Exploring and Understanding the Transitional Process

Crabtree et al. (2007) explored similarities and differences in the teaching and learning environments between FE and HE. It was apparent that several factors were instrumental to a successful transition, these were attitude and ability of the student, tutor's self-concept and beliefs, and the teaching and learning environment; all of which differ between the varying educational levels. Briggs et al. (2012) highlighted learner identity as the key factor in retaining students and ensuring that they are successful in HE. Similarly, Armstrong (2015) identified that with widening backgrounds of HE students in post-1992 universities, and as a result a more diverse student body, the opportunities for social integration in the initial stages of the course would be beneficial to easing the transitional process. Similarly, Brooman and Darwent (2014) found that early contact with academic staff and their accessibility, as well as small group work, enhances the social integration and learner identity on newly transitioning students. The use of social networking by universities to reinforce learner identities was suggested by Armstrong (2015) as a key area of good practice, which was supported by Briggs et al. (2012), Ribchester et al. (2014) and Berger and Wild (2016).

Interventions to Support the Transitional Process into HE

Armstrong (2015) explored initiatives to support transition in a post-1992 university and students' experiences appeared to be generally positive, with the majority successfully managing the transition. Open-days were found to have been most effective of the pre-entry engagement strategies, however, there were mixed-results regarding the implementation of an induction programme due to the diverse nature of students in post-1992 universities and meeting all of their needs (Armstrong, 2015). Thomas (2013) identified that induction programmes can be successful but must have an explicit academic purpose and form part of a range of interventions, such as pre-entry strategies, induction, and learning and teaching in the first semester. In support, Hultberg et al. (2008) found an introductory course provided a well-planned and stimulating introduction to HE, which helped students develop better prerequisites to manage their studies. However, Quave and Harper (2014) state that introductory courses that are generic in their educational content are not effective at connecting with the audience and other means of communicating with the students may be more beneficial. Knox (2005) utilised a credit-weighted preparatory module (a summer programme) in their research and suggested that it

was beneficial for students to adjust to new delivery and assessment regimes in a supported environment, however, due to key methodological misgivings the research was inconclusive. With pre-entry interventions of this nature it is important to know when to intervene. Jessen and Elander (2009) believe this is not appropriate whilst students are in FE because there is a careful balance to be struck between maximising orientation to HE and minimising impact on FE study; it is perhaps even controversial whether FE is the right point at which to prepare students for different requirements in HE. Some interventions explicitly involve the student in the design process, such as the co-creation of curriculum (Money, *et al.*, 2016) and the development of bespoke assessment criteria (Jessen and Elander, 2009). Furthermore, social networking sites appear to have some influence on student transitions, Ribchester et al. (2014) suggests that due to the majority of students accessing course and universities' Facebook and Twitter profiles they are vital in the development of a new student. In support, Berger and Wild (2016) believe that greater use of social media by university departments will enable them with an opportunity to lessen many of the negative consequences that have arisen due to historical delivery patterns being repeated.

The Transition of Specialist Demographics into HE

Research focusing on the transition of specific demographics into HE is relatively small (Penketh and Goddard 2008). From the literature that exists, Pike (2008) and Pike and Harrison (2011) focused on the transition of direct entrants from FE to HE. Prior to Pike (2008) and Pike and Harrison's (2011) research there was very little published research on the actual transition across institutional and programme boundaries from a foundation degree at a FEC to the final year of an honours degree at a HEI (Nelson 2006; Penketh and Goddard 2008). However, Stone (2004) did conduct a HND/C student transfer and progression project (SPAT), which has informed future research in the area (Pike, 2008; Pike and Harrison, 2011). More recently, there has been research surrounding the transition of mature students to HE (O'Donell and Tobell, 2007; O'Donell and Tobell, 2009; Merrill, 2015; Kahu, *et al.*, 2015; Christie, *et al.*, 2016). There has been a focus on mature students' experiences (termed emotional journey's) engaging with HE studies after a prolonged absence from education (O'Donnell and Tobell, 2007; Shea, *et al.,* 2014). Furthermore, Duffy (2013) focused on mature students and their use of social media when transitioning into HE, despite inconclusive results. O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007) note that there is still a lack of literature on older adult learners' transition to HE in the UK. Christie et al. (2008) agree that further studies are needed to explore the journeys of mature students as they progress through education and encounter different learning environments.

Subject Specific Transitional Research

Briggs et al. (2012) states that the area of student transition is under-contextualised in respect to the transition of students to a specific subject area, and this is true for the domain of sport and exercise related subjects because no literature could be found that used a sport and exercise related student-body. This further reinforces the rationale for conducting this research. Of the literature that exists, McSweeney (2014) found that social care students were reluctant to approach staff for help despite apprehension about lessons and assessments. Whilst Pampaka et al. (2016) identified mathematics students found independent learning the biggest transitional issue (Pepin, *et al.*, 2012). Students did have mainly positive feelings about this aspect of learning, whilst perceiving it as a challenge. In order to offset similar experiences, Stuttard (2007) implemented four key elements throughout a series of nursing degrees to support students; these were 'Learning to Learn' (study skills), making friends (social support), managing lifestyle and finances, and orientation to campus, city, course and career. A curriculum integrated action-based approach may be an effective method for increasing retention and ensuring that the students' transition is a positive one, however, this requires further research. Research in to the transition of social science post-graduate students by Tobbell and O'Donnell (2013) found commonalities with the aforementioned research, it could be argued that there are distinct socio-economic aspects to post-graduate transition that require greater breadth of research.

Aim and Objectives

This present study builds on the previous research by investigating the experience of sport and exercise students transitioning from a FEC to an undergraduate degree course at a post-1992 HEI. The aim of the research is to identify students' thoughts, feelings, and experiences during the transitional process, thus providing an insight into improving the retention, achievement and student satisfaction of future transitioning students. The findings will enable a series of guidelines and recommendations to be formed on how to further support and manage the transition process of students from FE to HE. These guidelines will be beneficial for both HE and FE academic staff who aim to provide optimal conditions for effective transition to increase retention, achievement, and ultimately increase student satisfaction.

Method

The design of this research was based on the need to develop an in-depth understanding of the students experiences when transitioning between FE and HE, therefore, an inductive interpretive phenomenological approach was used within a

qualitative methodology to listen to the students' voice and capture the reality of their transition (Creswell, 1998). Having gained institutional ethical approval, semi-structured, in-depth, one-to-one interviews were conducted to collect data and enable the social reality of the transition to be captured (Pike and Harrison, 2011). An outline schedule of open questions, adapted from Stone's (2004) SPAT research, were used to explore student experiences; similar to other research in this particular area (Pike, 2008; Pike & Harrison, 2011).

The target population were students who have previously studied at an FEC, and have subsequently transitioned to a post-1992 HEI and enrolled on a sport and exercise related degree course. The participants were asked to volunteer and the criteria for selection of volunteers was that they were enrolled on a sport and exercise related undergraduate degree, previously studied at a FEC, and completed Level 4 of their undergraduate degree in the previous year. Level 5 students were utilised due to the fact that they had recently gone through the transitional process and therefore could retrospectively recall their experiences, as opposed to Level 4 students who were currently in a state of transition. Twenty-six students met the criteria, and the 12 students who volunteered were interviewed over a six-week period, early in Semester 2 of their Level 5 studies (11 male, 1 female, *mean age*= 19.23, *SD*= 0.78). DiCicco and Crabtee (2006) state that 10 or more interviews will ensure that there is depth and richness to the data collected, without data saturation occurring. The cumulative duration of the interviews was 6 hours 48 minutes, averaging 34 minutes each. Interviews were audio-recorded to minimise any difficulties in recall when transcribing the data at a later date (DiCicco and Crabtree, 2006). The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Thematic analysis of the transcribed audio-recordings was used to identify key themes, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The majority of the small-body of research in the area has used thematic analysis due to its logical nature of grouping and categorising key data to highlight trends and relationships (Bogdan and Elliott, 2015; Jesson and Elander, 2009; O'Donell and Tobell, 2007; Pike and Harrison, 2011). Gratton and Jone's (2010) framework for undertaking coding was followed with relevant data initially assigned a code, then statements were placed into first order categories, and finally key themes were formed.

Findings and Discussion

The research was carried out in order to investigate, and obtain a better understanding of the transition that students make from FEC's to HEI's, specifically post-1992 universities. This information has then been used to create a series of practical guidelines to inform other post-1992 universities and FEC's on how to further manage and support student transition between the two environments and hopefully improve retention, achievement and student satisfaction.
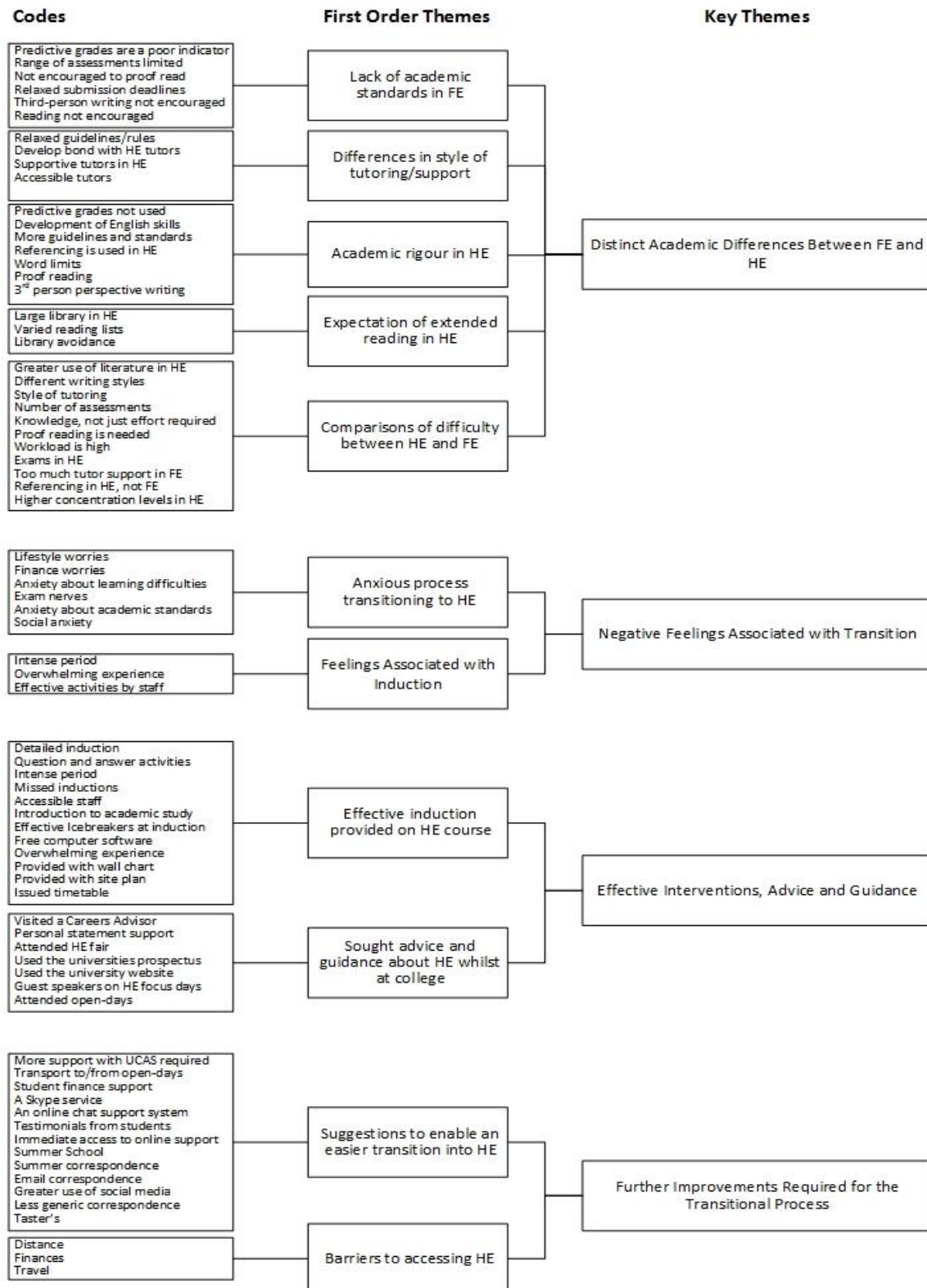
Figure 1. The transitional experiences of a cohort of sport and exercise students progressing from FE to HE.

The findings suggest that the transitional experiences of students studying on sport and exercise related degrees are extremely diverse. However, despite the personal nature of these transitional experiences, there was a large degree of commonality within the students' reflections, therefore, the data analysed was quantified into four key themes. Data analysis elicited 349 significant statements, which were categorised in to seventy-six data codes, subsequently grouped into eleven first order themes, and culminating in four key themes: *distinct academic differences; effective interventions, advice and guidance; negative feelings associated with transition; further improvements required for the transitional process.*
The findings of this study are illustrated in Figure 1 (Pg. 6) and each of the key themes are discussed in the subsequent four sub-sections.

Distinct Academic Differences

According to Bandias et al. (2011) there are distinct differences in the approach that FE and HE plan and deliver their curricula, and the systems in which they employ. It is understandable that transitioning students should notice and feel a tangible change in academic differences between the largely vocational systems in FEC's and the more academically rigorous HEI systems. It was clear that academic rigour was very much a part of the students' HE experience. Writing styles, fixed assessment submission deadlines, referencing, word-limits, and proof-reading were identified as positive elements of their study. These standards differed from their FE education, where there was an identified leniency with academic standards when compared to university. According to the students, FE does not place much emphasis on varying assessment formats, proof reading assessments prior to submission, the style of writing used, and reading from a wide-body of research to inform assessment. Participants noted:

"…I didn't look through my work [proof reading] as much at college. I just handed it in. In college we got another chance to submit our work after feedback, whereas at university we have only one opportunity…"

"…the work at college compared to uni is nothing really, you didn't have to think about referencing and you could hand your assessment in as many times as you like…"

"The way that you structure your essays. At college there wasn't a word count or anything, as long as you structured your essay right and to the assignment brief it was alright."

Instead the students were taught what they must achieve to meet the awarding body's criteria and were heavily guided towards this as opposed to developing their academic skills. This rather negative view of FE assessment and lack of academic rigour may be a result of the students' difficulty in adapting to HE and the different. environments/systems that exist in the sector (Tranter and Warn, 2003; Smith and Hopkins, 2005). Smith and Hopkins (2005) state that a mismatch between students' pre-transition aspirations and the reality of their first year at university may lead to drop-out and a reduction in retention.

The identified differences between FE and HE lead to the obvious comparison of course difficulty. It was apparent that all students thought that there HE studies were more difficult than their FE studies. However, this phenomenon can be explained by the varying academic levels delivered by the two types of institution. Huddleston and Unwin (2013) state that one of the FE sector's key aims is to fulfil their role as the main provider of sub-degree post-compulsory education and vocational training at a local level. However, with the emergence of HE and FE partnerships in recent times, and their popularity, the colleges are increasingly delivering higher levels of education that can rival HE (Wilkins, *et al.*, 2013). The expectation of extended reading in HE was a theme amongst the student's responses. The size of the library and the extended reading lists provided by teaching staff required some adjustment of study habits by the students. A student noted,

"The massive difference is reading because you don't really read at college… I only used 3 or 4 books for my whole college course. At uni I use 15 books for an assessment…"

Bharuthram (2012) states that reading is one of the most important academic tasks encountered by students, and that within HE students are exposed to a number of texts that require independent reading. At this level students are expected to comprehend what they read so that they can analyse, critique, evaluate and synthesise information from various sources. Even though reading is widely considered a key study habit for students (Cottrell, 2013), a few of the students interviewed stated that they avoided going to the library as much as possible and engaging with this aspect of their studies. At first this appears rather worrying and detrimental to their achievement, however, this phenomenon could be attributed to the development and maintenance of online library databases in education (Seale, 2013). The use of online learning and virtual learning environments are now commonplace in education, as opposed to the traditional face-to-face educational delivery (Rennie and Morrison, 2013).

The style of tutoring between FE and HE was also seen to differ by the students. Students were wholly positive of their HE experience, and largely so of their FE experience. Students were positive of their relationship with personal tutors throughout both levels of education. Moxley et al. (2013) believes that an educational programme needs to establish a warm and supportive atmosphere that welcomes the involvement of the students and this will in-turn improve retention. Therefore, it is simple to surmise that these positive experiences with personal tutors could be a reason why these students are still studying in post-compulsory education. It is a widely held belief that an effective personal tutoring and mentoring programme can have a significant effect on student retention and could be the difference between attrition and retention (Li, *et al.*, 2015).

Implication for Practice. Something needs to be done to bridge the gap between the FE vocational systems and the HE academic systems (Tranter and Wearn, 2003). The FE colleges have a responsibility to prepare their students for either employment, or further study, therefore, it would be good practice by FEC's if they incorporated and emphasised academic guidelines into their vocational qualifications. The FEC's have a duty to follow the awarding bodies grading criteria, however, the 'soft' implementation of key academic standards such as varying assessment formats, adopting different writing styles and attempting to introduce a wider-range of reading and referencing, would be directly beneficial to their students' development and progression.

Effective Interventions, Advice and Guidance

The findings identified that all of the students had engaged in pre-transition advice and guidance whilst studying at their respective FEC's. The students were unanimously supportive of the quality of advice and guidance provided. Careers guidance and support with writing personal statements for UCAS were provided by the FEC's. According to Andrews (2016), these findings are scarce in a field that is wholly diminished due to government implemented austerity measures. Andrews (2016) suggests that the statutory duty to secure access to careers guidance, and whether or not to provide careers education, have been left to individual institutions. Therefore, with costs coming from existing budgets it has often meant that services have been cut when funds are scarce. Predictably Ofsted (2013) reported that the new arrangements were not working well enough, and that only one in five educational institutions were providing young people with the information, advice and guidance they needed (Dent, *et al.*, 2015). In light of this information, the FEC's that the students attended appear to have valued highly the support and guidance for soon to be transitioning students, with all students interviewed receiving advice and guidance on their path to HE. A student noted,

"They [careers guidance] were really good and they helped me decide what to do and they gave a realistic sort of {erm} answers, advice, instead of saying what they should have…"

Students received a range of guidance and support opportunities through their FEC provider's links with a HEI, such as HE staff delivering a talk at a FEC, providing transport to HE fairs, encouraging attendance at HEI open-days and referring students to HEI publications such as a prospectus and website. These findings are supported by Stephenson and Yorke (2013) who believe that partnership working is key to quality and capability in HE.

Students identified that testimonials from current students were an effective aspect of advice and guidance, as were attendance at open-days where they participated in course related activities. In support of these methods to engage students, a study by the HEA in 2012 examined pre-entry interventions to HE and emphasised the importance of interventions which nurture the formation of peer-group support both academically and socially (Gazeley and Aynsley, 2012).

Thomas (2013), who is the author of the 'What Works?' model focusing on transition of students to HE, highlights the use of pre-entry interventions, induction, and teaching in the first semester of the course as barometers to retention and lifelong learning. Whilst all of the students received pre-transition advice and guidance, few attended pre-entry interventions, and most only had their first teaching contact with academic staff during the course induction, often delivered in the first week of the course. However, despite the lack of pre-entry interventions that Thomas (2013) and Gazeley and Aynsley (2012) deem important to retention, the majority of students reported an effective induction to their course that supported them in successfully completing the first year of their course. A student noted,

"I had a really good induction… We were able to ask questions about what the course includes and what is required"

The students emphasised that the most effective parts of the induction programme were the accessibility of staff for advice and guidance, an introduction to academic skills, as well as free resources that would help students with their studies, for example free software, and academic diaries.
Many of the students interviewed used descriptors such as 'intense' and 'overwhelming' to describe their induction period, despite it being viewed as a positive period. This in-part supports Armstrong's (2015) musings that mixed-results would come from the implementation of an induction programme due to the diverse

nature of students in post-1992 universities and meeting all of their needs. Thomas (2013) identified that induction programmes can be successful but must have an explicit academic purpose and form part of a range of interventions. A few students were 'late-starters' and missed their induction period, this was considered somewhat of a set-back by those students who then felt that they had to 'catch-up' to the rest of the students that were present for the induction.

Implications for Practice: With the limited investment being put into information, advice and guidance by local authorities and government (Andrews, 2016), HE has to take a greater responsibility for developing network links with FEC's in the local area. This network could provide opportunities for both academic staff and university students to visit FEC's and provide much needed information, testimonials, advice and guidance, which could only have a positive impact on student numbers at their respective HEI. Also, it would more than likely be welcomed by the FEC's due to the minimal costs associated. Thomas (2013) states that pre-entry interventions are crucial to a successful transition and increasing retention, however, very few students interviewed in this study actually attended an intervention of this nature. Therefore, to reduce the anxiety students felt during their course induction, a pre-intervention strategy could be highly valuable to universities to minimise non-continuation and increase retention.

Negative Feelings Associated with Transition

Pinheiro (2004) believes that transition to HE is a difficult process because of the simultaneous educational, ecological and developmental changes faced by students. This was reflected in the findings, where it was evident that many of students had feelings of nervousness, worry and apprehension about such diverse issues as lifestyle, finance, academic standards, learning difficulties, and social anxiety when transitioning to HE.
Andrews and Harlen (2006) believe social anxiety to be widely regarded as a key contributor to student attrition, therefore it was a worrying occurrence that four students had worries about 'fitting-in'. Of particular note were the following statements,

"I needed friends and tried to fit in…"

"I was apprehensive about the academic side but more so socially"

"I didn't know anybody and I'm not an overly confident person when it comes to mixing with other students so to say I was worried is an understatement, it was scary"

People with social anxiety harbour pervasive fears about being negatively evaluated by others (Clark, 2001) and these fears frequently result in significant emotional distress and avoidance of situations that involve potential scrutiny and criticism (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Within universities a key aim is to prepare students with the appropriate skills for employment, one of these being communication, which has encouraged the use of more interactive methods of learning, such as group based learning, and peer review (Russel and Shaw, 2009). Therefore, the increasingly social teaching methods commonly used in HE could exacerbate the anxiety for newly transitioning students, and even reduce performance compared to peers that are comfortable in social situations (Russel and Shaw, 2009). Research does suggest that social anxiety often goes undetected (Kashdan and Herbert, 2001; Muzina and El Sayegh, 2001) with low rates of self-reporting (Bruce and Atezaza-Saeed, 1999), leading Russel and Shaw (2009) to conclude that social anxiety may be commonly present, though largely invisible, in HE environments.

Many students at post-1992 universities can be described as 'non-traditional' entrants to HE and part of the widening access initiative; these students come from a range of backgrounds and commonly have to have seek part-time employment to subsidise their studies and lifestyle (Moreau and Leafwood, 2006). The findings highlighted that finance and lifestyle factors were a worry, amongst others, supports the notion that post-1992 university students are not all financially self-sufficient (Callendar and Wilkinson, 2003). A student noted,

"I was worried about the money because I didn't get a lot [from student finance] so I'd have to get a job to fund food…"

In a new environment such as HE, students would want to direct the majority of their focus to the educational, ecological and developmental changes mentioned by Pinheiro (2003), therefore, the financial pressures, and potential part-time employment, may be an unnecessary distraction from their newly acquired lifestyles/studies and could potentially affect retention.

Michie et al. (2010) believe that because universities are recruiting a more diverse student body then the students themselves may not be traditionally suited to academia. This was possibly reflected in the findings, with academic standards, and worries regarding learning difficulties, prevalent amongst the students. Students noted,

"I was a little bit worried about it… could I cope with the work. At school I had a little trouble… because they thought I had dyslexia."

"I thought I was out of my depth, I'll be honest. I thought that I couldn't do it and the work was too tough… you see people leave in the first semester…"

This level of study may have been previously unattainable to the generation before, therefore, with the greater accessibility to HE, it is somewhat of an unknown entity for first-generation HE students (Gofen, 2009). Furthermore, being the first member of a family to attend university has its own set of pressures that could exacerbate any pre-existing worries about HE and the academic standards required (Thomas and Quinn, 2006).

Implications for Practice: With the widening of access providing a gate-way for 'non-traditional' students to study in HE, it appears that students have anxiety or negative feelings associated with the transition. The specific issues are very diverse, and personal, which makes it difficult to say how and when these issues could be dealt with effectively. Therefore, it should not be the responsibility of an individual but all parties, the FEC and the HEI, to understand their cohort and provide the students with relevant information and support regarding lifestyle, social aspects, finance, and academic standards, prior to and during university. Effective pre-entry interventions may be the most effective means of educating students from FEC's on the requirements and standards at the HEI's. Thus, reducing the negative feelings associated with the transitional period.

Further Improvements Required for the Transitional Process.

Previous research by Yorke et al. (1997) found that poor course choice, financial stress and aspects of the student experience were the most commonly cited reasons for attrition amongst students in the U.K. Similar to Yorke et al. (1997), the respondents in this study deemed finances to be a key barrier to accessing HE, alongside traveling and distance. Lynch and O'riordan (1998) stated that economical barriers were of prime importance to students progressing into HE, especially with the HE funding regime in the U.K. changing periodically (Yorke and Longden, 2008). One student noted,

"That was the part that I struggled with more than anything, actually getting… work..."

If further support was given on student finance by the FEC's and HEI's then it may help alleviate some of the economical anxieties and issues faced by the transitioning students.

It is inevitable that if transitioning students cant afford either the tuition, accommodation, transport, or lifestyle choices whilst studying in HE then it will adversely effect their studies. Therefore, student-loans become all the more important to students, regardless of the debt that will be faced by students post-university. Harrison et al. (2015) state that students from lower social-class backgrounds now show a positivity about debt as a means of enabling them to access higher-level careers. The findings did not identify any worries surrounding student debt post-university, and with most of the students primarily coming from working-class backgrounds, it may support Harrison et al. (2015) notion of perceived 'positive-debt'. This attitude may be a direct consequence to the spiralling costs of living and HE tuition fees in recent times, and the realisation that money will have to be borrowed to pursue academic and career aspirations.

The students concluded their interviews by providing a series of recommendations to enable a smoother transition. It is evident that all of the students thought that their transition experience could have been better, despite being largely positive of their time in HE, reflecting Armstrong's (2015) findings. Pre-entry interventions such as summer schools and taster's were suggested, as well as early engagement strategies such as greater use of social media, and non-generic correspondence. Yorke and Thomas (2003) state that the function of interventions such as summer schools, taster's and preparatory modules is to begin a process of engagement early between the student and institution, which will assist the students to become more academically prepared and indirectly increase retention and achievement. Thomas (2012) emphasises the benefits of pre-entry interventions with new students, as well as early engagement strategies, perhaps using social media or alternative correspondence, to provide prospective students with realistic expectations and develop academic skills. Social networking sites appear to have some influence on student transition with universities using social media more frequently to enable students to socialise and develop an identity (Armstrong, 2015). With social anxiety being prevalent amongst the students interviewed, it could be advantageous if a managed early engagement strategy was used by universities, and the low-cost but highly popular platforms such as Twitter and Facebook would be suitable to achieve this. Berger and Wild (2016) and Ribchester et al. (2014) support the use of social media in HE, and specifically highlight the need for HEI's to embrace it further.

A couple of students mentioned an online chat-based support tool to aid transition. A tool for those who don't have confidence speaking in new social environments may be beneficial, with Skype being suggested as a platform to achieve this personalised service. This bespoke strategy may be more suitable for students because one of the students noted,

"... as long as they're not generalised [correspondence]... they're deleted. If it's a nice personal one... then that would be okay."

A key limitation of the online chat-based support tool is the cost of providing such as service. It would need to be a 24-hour service that swiftly responds to students questions and queries and the logistics of staffing this around the clock may be not be feasible from a financial perspective, and also because of the anti-social hours that staff would be required to work.

Implications for Practice: The HEI's have a responsibility to its students to ease their transition into a new academic environment and the findings from this study indicate that the strategies employed need to be more sophisticated, diverse, personalised, and target students early to be truly supportive strategies. Pre-entry interventions and specifcally early-engagement strategies should not be deemed optional by school and departments. The consequence of implementing these strategies means that barriers are reduced, retention is increased, and ultimately a greater student satisfaction.

Conclusion and Guidelines

This research provides valuable insight into sport and exercise students experiences when transitioning from FEC's to a post-1992 HEI. The students' experiences were largely positive, with all managing a successful transition. However, the findings support Pike and Harrison (2011) assertions that the transition can be a difficult time, as students cope with crossing both institutional and programme boundaries, whilst also negotiating a new academic culture. It is evident that there are negative feelings associated with the transitional period, presenting a series of barriers that the student must overcome to avoid non-continuation and be successful on their programme of study. In practice, both FEC's and HEI's have a joint responsibility to ensure that students are adequately prepared to make the transition and not destined to fail in the process (Bogdan and Elliott, 2015). It is clear that the transitional process can be further improved and the use of effective and bespoke pre-entry interventions and early engagement strategy by HEI's are imperative to ensure that students are sufficiently managed and supported throughout their transition, minimising attrition.

A series of practical guidelines have been created to inform post-1992 universities and FEC's on how to further manage and support student transition, with the aim of improving retention, achievement and student satisfaction. They are as follows:

- If FEC's incorporated and emphasised 'soft' implementation of key academic standards and guidelines into their teaching and vocational qualifications, such as varying assessment formats, writing styles, referencing, and greater research, it would be directly beneficial to their students' development and preparation for possible transition to HE.

- HE has to take a greater responsibility for developing network links with FEC's in the local area. The limited funds of FEC's to provide 'in-house' advice and guidance, means that HE must support this process by creating opportunities for both academic staff and students to provide information, testimonials, advice and guidance to FEC's.

- Effective and bespoke pre-entry interventions should be used by HEI's as the preferred means of educating students from FEC's on the requirements and standards at HEI's. This will hopefully reduce the negative feelings associated with the transition, whilst also allowing students to form early relationships, establish an identity and become further aware of academic regulations.

- Pre-entry interventions and early-engagement strategies are a necessity for all departments/courses as a strategy to increase retention and student satisfaction. However, the strategies employed need to be sophisticated, diverse, bespoke, and target students early.

  The size and scope of the research means there are limits on its generalisability, however, the outcomes provide a revealing insight into student transition that could be investigated further in the future. There is a need in the research area to identify good practice and the impact of specific pre-intervention strategies, as well as the benefits of early engagement strategies utilised in post-1992 universities. Furthermore, the use of social networking to support student transition could be investigated further.

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