

Transition and Adaptability in Educational and Organizational Contexts

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Abstract

The Division of Academics, Researchers and Teachers in Psychology (DART-P) hosted a symposium at the British Psychological Society's Annual Conference 2018, at which the concepts of transition and adaptability were explored within the context of higher and pre-tertiary education and in academic organizational contexts. The talks and discussions which occurred during the symposium considered some of the challenges and opportunities experienced by students and academic staff over the course of their respective academic journeys—in and through university, to postgraduate study, and into employment within academic organizations—with a focus on 'adaptability' during these transitional moments. The ultimate aim of the symposium, reflected in this article, was to explore current thinking, developments, and practice in this area, and stimulate debate, in order to better understand and support students and academic staff during transitional moments of their lives.

Introduction

The theme of this year's British Psychological Society Annual Conference 2018 was *moving psychology forward*. Central to this theme was the notion of change. A recent literature has begun to emerge which suggests that one's ability to adjust in order to successfully navigate change (adaptability) may impact upon their academic and non-academic lives. The Division of Academics, Researchers and Teachers in Psychology (DART-P), recognizing the need for greater understanding and debate in this area, hosted a symposium at the British Psychological Society's Annual Conference 2018, at which the concepts of transition and adaptability were explored within the context of higher and pre-tertiary education and in academic organizational contexts. Specifically, it examined the role of adaptability in educational and organizational contexts, and explored some of the challenges and opportunities experienced by students and academic staff in making the transition to university or into new workplace roles (respectively). The ultimate aim of the symposium, reflected in this article, was to explore current thinking, developments, and practice in this area, and stimulate debate, in order to better understand and support students and academic staff during transitional moments of their lives.

This article summarizes the talks and discussions which occurred during the symposium. *Holliman* first considers the construct of 'adaptability' and examines the extent and mechanisms by which students' adaptability may predict academic outcomes at university (i.e. whether students successfully complete their studies and are awarded a degree). *Hulme* then provides a qualitative exploration of the student transition to university, thinking about the enormity of the changes and ways in which students and academic staff can be supported to adapt. *Taylor* then presents an autobiographical account of her experience in making the transition from PhD student to early career staff in an academic context. Finally, focusing on employment within

academic organizations, *Wilson-Smith* explores academic kindness and the need for organizations in which we are working to provide a supportive non-stressful environment to facilitate our transitions.

1. Andrew Holliman: Adaptability, Engagement, and Degree Completion: A Longitudinal Investigation of University Students

In the United Kingdom, a growing proportion of university entrants are not expected to successfully complete their studies and gain a degree (Higher Education Statistical Agency, HESA, 2018): this is problematic given that non-completion is thought to have mostly negative consequences (Grebennikov & Shah, 2012). Improving completion and reducing drop-out rates in higher education has become a global endeavor (Vossensteyn et al, 2015); however, with many nations so-far unsuccessful in their efforts to reduce drop-out rates, there is a need to better understand factors that might influence these important academic outcomes.

A developing literature has begun to focus on students' transition to university (see *Hulme*, below) and the possible role of students' adaptability; that is, adjustments to their thoughts, behaviours, and emotions in the face of new, changing, or uncertain situations or events (Martin et al, 2012, 2013). Given that the entry to, and passage through university represents a period of immense change, it is conceivable that one's ability to 'adapt' might be of importance and may impact upon a range of academic outcomes. Indeed, recent studies have shown that university students' adaptability is predictive of their mid-course academic achievement (Holliman et al, 2018) and is also a significant indirect predictor of academic achievement via behavioural engagement (Collie et al, 2017). The research summarised here—see Holliman et al. (2018), for a full publication—extended the research by Collie et al. (2017)

using final degree completion data to see whether university students' adaptability is predictive of degree completion via behavioural engagement.

One hundred and eighty-six undergraduates from a single HEI in the UK enrolled in either a single or joint honours psychology degree, were surveyed for their adaptability (using the Adaptability Scale, Martin et al, 2013) and behavioural engagement (using the Motivation and Engagement Scale University/College, Martin, 2007) at the start of their undergraduate study. Their completion status along with other demographic variables and prior achievement (UCAS tariff point score) were extracted from the University Records System at the end of their degree. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to assess the hypothesized model of relations.

It was found that beyond effects of age, gender, and prior achievement, adaptability was a significant direct predictor of both positive and negative behavioural engagement, and a significant indirect predictor of university degree completion through negative (but not positive) behavioural engagement. These findings were in line with the academic achievement data reported in Collie et al. (2017) and other research evidence and theory in this area. Consistent with findings in secondary education (Burns et al, 2017; Martin et al, 2015) students higher in adaptability may be more likely to self-regulate in other situations, such as those involving planning, task management, or persistence (positive behaviours). Conversely, students lower in adaptability may anticipate lower self-efficacy and poorer performance and be more inclined to manoeuvre defensively e.g. by self-sabotaging or by disengaging (negative behaviours) – see Martin et al. (2013).

These findings summarised here and elaborated on in Holliman et al. (2018) hold important implications for educators and researchers seeking to understand how students manage

the transition to university, and the extent to which their adaptability may impact upon their behavioural engagement and subsequent degree completion. Moreover, given that adaptability and behavioural engagement are regarded as alterable constructs (van Rooij et al, 2017) there may be scope for universities to better support students to prepare for and ‘adapt’ more effectively to the novelty of university education, and to also adopt more adaptive engagement behaviours to enhance their readiness for the university experience.

2. Julie Hulme: Mind the Gap: Supporting Students in Making the Transition from Pre-Tertiary to University Education

The Higher Education Academy (Hulme & De Wilde, 2015) hosted a series of events to explore the transition to university, and to improve retention and success of students. The HEA events took place across the UK in a range of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) disciplines, including psychology. Teachers and students from schools, colleges, and universities were invited for a ‘big conversation’ about transitions. Discussions were noted, and participants wrote a ‘pledge postcard’ outlining their intended actions as a result of attending. Notes, event evaluations, postcards and correspondence, were collated, forming a data corpus from 381 participants. Thematic analysis was conducted as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Five main themes were identified, as follows:

- a) Strategic importance of student transition into higher education
- b) The STEM student journey
- c) Student preparedness for transition into higher education
- d) Awareness, communication and transition to higher education curricula
- e) Change and collaborative initiatives to ease transition.

a) Strategic importance of student transition into higher education

Participants across all disciplines and groups noted that transition is important, can be challenging, and needs preparation. For example, this school teacher noted:

'Transition is a huge issue, I want to ensure my students are well equipped to succeed in whatever they go on to do' (Teacher).

Some tensions were evident, in that not all students go on to study at university, while university lecturers recognized that, alongside their responsibility to support students, they needed to maintain academic standards:

'What more we in the HE sector, particularly as a lecturer, can do to facilitate this transition, without lowering standards' (Lecturer).

b) The STEM student journey

Several participants noted that students made a series of transitions throughout their education, and that learning from previous transitions could be applied to progressing to university. Likewise, teachers and lecturers wished to understand the ways in which schools and university differ, to help students to navigate:

'I'd like to know more about how to make my teaching more inclusive for these new students – appreciating the issues underlying school-HE transition will help this' (Lecturer).

c) Student preparedness for transition into higher education

A strong theme related to what 'being prepared' means. There was a sense that university required different study skills, and a push to '*think like*' a STEM professional. Students recognized the extra demands, and felt poorly prepared. This had implications for teaching practice in both sectors: this lecturer wanted to: '*Think more broadly about independent study and what that actually means*' in order to raise awareness among students, whilst a school

teacher prioritized: *'Improve how I teach evaluation skills'*, to move students beyond rote learned evaluations and into deeper thought processes. Signposting the contrasts was perceived as essential.

d) Awareness, communication and transition to higher education curricula

Teachers and lecturers recognized a conflict, or tension. Lecturers sometimes perceived teachers as teaching for rote learning, while school teachers sometimes felt that university lecturers failed to support students. Discussions enabled appreciation of the different pressures and contexts within the different types of institution:

'To see just how much of a "them and us" situation exists between teachers of pre-tertiary and university lecturers' (Teacher).

'Despite working with schools a great deal, I learnt some very interesting things about what A-level physics students do and don't do as part of their courses these days... We need to talk to A-level science/maths teachers more, and to the incoming students, to find out what they (should) know – not make assumptions based on what we think is the case' (Lecturer).

e) Change and collaborative initiatives to ease transition

Given this understanding, the discussions moved towards finding solutions. Teachers, lecturers, and students, emphasized ways to support transition. For teachers and lecturers, there was an appetite for *'work shadowing'* and more effective use of outreach activities. Students suggested going back to their schools and colleges to share their university experiences:

'When I applied for university there was not much information about the transition into HE and what to expect so I wanted to help others who are in the same situation as I was to improve their transition and make the most of their resources available' (Student).

From these events, a set of recommendations was established. Clearly, there is a need to share knowledge and practice across sectors, and to consider ways in which we can scaffold the first-year undergraduate learning experience to gradually increase skills and independence. It is important to build students' ability to deal with change, and to signal the nature of change to them. Considerable attention needs to be paid to assessment methods to facilitate learning. Finally, further psychological and pedagogical research is needed to better inform our approaches to transition, which should involve students to ensure accurate capture of their lived experiences.

In conclusion, stakeholders involved in all aspects of the transition to university need to collaborate around both research and interventions. Transition is both a challenging and an exciting time for students, and this research suggests that we all have a responsibility to ensure that students' early university experiences are supported, accessible, and inclusive, enabling them to grow in independence and competence.

3. Charlotte Taylor: Early Career Adaptability and Transition from PhD to Early Career

As the third speaker in the symposium, *Taylor* presented an account of her own career transitions from undergraduate to PhD and into an early career academic role. She is now working in an academic context supporting the development of postgraduate research students across all disciplines, and also drew upon these experiences to inform her thinking. Her full talk is not reported here, due to its autobiographical nature; however, several key themes were explored, and are reported here:

a) Career transitions

Career transitions were framed as building upon prior transitions into university education, into postgraduate study, and ultimately into employment in an academic context.

What we learn from early transitions can help us to better manage transitions at later stages in our lives.

b) Perfectionism

Perfectionism (e.g. D'Souza et al., 2011) was perceived as a difficulty faced by many graduates entering postgraduate education and early-stage academic careers. Frequently, we may lack confidence in the quality of our work, relative to more experienced peers, and strive to achieve perfect work. Not only is perfection unachievable, but it creates barriers to completing work, and thus limits productivity. Academic success can depend on working to an 'adequate' or 'good' standard, rather than achieving perfection.

c) Impostor syndrome

Perfectionism relates to another common experience of early career postgraduates and academics, that of impostor syndrome (e.g. Cozzarelli & Major, 1990). A lack of confidence can lead us to believe that we are not only less experienced, but also not suited to an academic career choice. We may feel that we are waiting to be found out, and hide behind perfectionism in our attempts to remain undiscovered and in employment. However, the very fact that this is such a common experience indicates that impostor syndrome is not based upon a perception of reality, and that we need to overcome it.

d) Social support

In Taylor's experience, the best way to cope with the transitions into postgraduate education and academic employment, and to overcome both perfectionism and impostor syndrome, is to ensure that we have strong social support mechanisms. Our relationships with our peers can be supportive, peers can encourage us, help us to recognize the good quality of our work, and help us through challenging times (e.g. of rejection, or delayed success) that inevitably

arise during every academic career. Likewise, a good mentor, who has already navigated these transitions and is supportive, can make all the difference to our early career experiences. Social support, both informal and formal, was recognized as a protective influence that facilitated transitions.

4. Kevin Wilson-Smith: Exploring the Role of Kindness in Academia: A Thematic Analysis

The perception of what constitutes an act of kindness can be hugely diverse dependent on individual differences in the individual acting kindly and the intended beneficiary of the behaviour. Kindness may be defined in a variety of ways but generally includes some form of helpful act towards someone in need that is made up of ‘a combination of emotional, behavioural, and motivational components...that benefit other people, or make others happy’ (Kerr et al. 2014, p. 23). Rowland (2018) also suggests that the increase in interest in the role of kindness is due to a number of factors including the spontaneous early development of altruism and empathy and a significant growth in the focus on positive psychology. Clegg and Rowland (2010) also note that academia is an interesting area to focus on in terms of studying kindness due to the fact that kindness is lacking in kite marks of (so called) teaching ‘excellence’ (e.g. NSS) despite claims that students see kindness as a mark of a good teacher and that there is fundamental difference in the sector between kindness and ‘due care’. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore student and staff perspectives on the role of kindness in academia.

A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted with 44 participants from a range of seven different UK Higher Education Institutions. The sample included a range of early career and senior academics (UG Student, PG Student, Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, and Professor) who took part in one-hour semi-structured interviews. Three main overarching master themes were identified as follows:

- a) Strategic importance of student transition into higher education
- b) Defining the kind act
- c) The institutional culture.

a) Strategic importance of student transition into higher education

In this theme we explored the way in which some staff felt that they had to choose between ‘kindness and career’.

‘The thing is, being kind doesn’t get you promoted in the long run, you have to be prepared’ (Senior Lecturer).

Students also described kindness as a personality trait that was unique to individual members of staff:

‘They either have it or they don’t!’ (UG Student).

Some participants outlined the relationship between stress and kindness, indicating that increased academic stress reduces the likeliness of kind acts:

‘There’s definitely a relationship between how stressed we are and how nice you are to each other, exam time is like dog eat dog...I need the textbook so I’ll get it but when you see your mates stressed we try to be more kind, and say come and have a brew mate’ (UG Student).

(b) Defining the kind act

Students defined kind acts (from the staff) in three main ways: rule breaking, providing time and proximity (access to tutorials etc.) and providing judgement and academic feedback:

‘I think staff are kind when they are prepared to break the rules to help, even if it gets them in trouble’ (UG Student).

'I know how busy they all are but to me being kind means making the time to see you and not just over email...face to face as a real person not a student number' (PG Student).

'It's remembering that for us we are still learning and not look at you like you're a moron because you didn't understand SPSS or something...it's being non-judgemental' (UG Student).

Staff tended to define acts of kindness in the workplace that involved being made to feel valued and thanked, with a number of individuals also referring to kind acts of 'taking someone else's workload' at times of stress:

'I think it's about seeing work as work and you as a person, smiling at you, acknowledging your ideas even if it's not what they agree with' (Lecturer).

'It's having physical markers of kindness, like leaving a note to say thank-you and more importantly not feeling they needed to tell you who it's from' (Professor).

'Just every day acknowledgements like do you want me to take some marking off you because I know how crazy busy you are' (Senior Lecturer).

(c) *The institutional culture*

Both students and staff expressed concerns over the way in which academic culture hinders the spread of kind acts and emphasised a philosophy of 'it's the system not the people':

'The pressure, REF, NSS, all these bloody measures to measure your performance means you constantly feel like you're not good enough...and when someone does well you feel anxious about how much you haven't done. It's not that I don't want to say well done or be mean about it but the environment makes you feel like everything is a competition' (Senior Lecturer).

'You're told from the off how ruthless and cut-throat academic careers can be so you just expect it and keep your head down' (PG Student).

'I think the irony is that being more kind to people would be good for your career because you would work harder for each other but the university system doesn't care as long as you get the grant' (Lecturer).

In conclusion, there was a strong message that kindness IS present in academic settings but staff often felt that it was undervalued/ignored as a positive organizational behaviour. The study themes indicate that HEI's and external stakeholders must consider ways to acknowledge and reward kindness when making judgements about teaching 'excellence'.

Discussion

The four talks presented during the DART-P symposium at the British Psychological Society's Annual Conference 2018, drawing upon a range of methods and perspectives, were united by a common theme: we need to better understand and support students and academic staff during transitional moments of their lives.

Holliman showed that being adaptable is important for students at university and that by supporting students to 'adapt' more effectively to the novelty of university education, it is likely to lead to improvements in student retention and academic success in first year and beyond. However, *Hulme* showed that we sometimes underestimate the amount of change that students experience during the transition. It is not only about the students adapting, but it is about how we signpost to students what is different (what do they have to adapt TO?), about the learning and teaching environment, the social circles, the skills they need, the nature of assessment, etc. Not only do students underestimate this, but teachers and lecturers do so too, so we need to work together, with students, to find the best ways to help students to know what they are adapting to.

We can also help students to learn from their previous transitions about how to navigate the transition to university, and how to support each other.

Taylor then showed that transitions happen all the way through academic life beyond our degree, and the transition to university is one we can all learn from. We might make a transition to postgraduate study, and to academic life, and there are some common challenges here that are illustrated by *Taylor's* story; for example, imposter syndrome and perfectionism are common experiences, and can make us feel isolated or stressed. It was argued that we need to be adaptable but we also need to work collaboratively and share those experiences, to help us to deal with these transitions.

Following this, *Wilson-Smith* showed that ultimately, it is important for the organization in which we are working to provide a supportive non-stressful environment to facilitate our transitions. Each of us has a responsibility to be kind, and to encourage our institutions to value kindness; in doing so, we support everyone's navigation across transitions, normalize peer support, and thus create a workplace/study place that fosters improved wellbeing.

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