SCC REPORT: **Non-traditional Students' Transitions- Passports to Success**

Student Partners: Reo Hoshi, Carrie Jia, Simon Wolff

Academic Partners: James Fenton, Laura Boubert

Sections:

Executive Summary

The **aims** of this project were to establish:

a) The challenges faced by non-traditional students transitioning into their 1st year at the University of Westminster

b) What could address these challenges and how a student passport approach could be best utilised to assist their transitions

The **motivation** behind this project was:

During the 2021-22 UK cycle, 562,060 new students joined an undergraduate degree, alongside a further 140,000+ international students, an overall 85% increase since 1994 (Bolton, 2022). As student numbers increase and higher education's intake net is cast wider, each years' cohort becomes increasingly diverse with more students from non-traditional backgrounds. In turn, interest from universities in students' transition challenges has grown (e.g., Thompson et al, 2021). But transition provision remains patchy and is primarily focused at group level, with little to address individual experience.

The **contributors** to the project were:

a) 2 members of staff

b) 3 student co-creators, and

c) 9 participants in 2 focus groups (all 1st-year students at the University of Westminster)

Qualitative data was collected through:

a) 2, 1-hour long recorded focus groups utlising semi-structured interviews

b) Transcribing and then analyzing the recordings

Expected themes emerged from the results (e.g. expectations not matching experiences), alongside some unexpected insights (e.g the extent and nature of the supporting input that transitioning students viewed as helpful).

Background and Aims

There is a recognised skills, knowledge, and assimilation gap in students transitioning into university from non-traditional backgrounds. The non-traditional characterization has been applied to a diverse range of students, including those: on the autism spectrum (e.g. Lambe et al., 2019; Lei et al., 2018; Vincent, 2019): students identifying with minority groups (e.g. Formby, 2015; O'Riordan, 2022); first-in-family students joining HE (e.g. O'Shea, 2016); and, increasingly, international students (Ecochard and Fotheringham, 2017; Ploner, 2018; Taylor and Ali, 2017). An obvious weakness with this kind of categorical approach is that an international mature student may be neurodiverse, first-in-family, and from a recognized minority group. Which category should they be assigned to?

So skills/knowledge development and need to support assimilation is identified by both academics and students, but more comprehensive measures which address individual needs in

such a diverse cohort is generally lacking (Jääskelä et al., 2018). The University of Westminster has previously made numerous attempts to address similar issues, e.g. through the Westminster Access and Participation plan (University of Westminster, 2022). Such reporting has clearly identified areas for additional interventions for transitioning groups, but also acknowledges that there are few swift answers and more needs to be done.

Two related strands of recent research have indicated ways in which a bottom-up approach based on students' own individual needs can add clarity and provide potential solutions. The first is co-created student content which builds the content and curriculum with the kind of skills and knowledge which would most benefit transitioning students (e.g. Woods and Homer, 2022). The second is student passports which have been shown to provide a personalised knowledge base to build from and an opportunity "to tailor the experience to the students' wants and needs" (Ryan and Morris, 2020, p 31). Essentially, students create their own version of what will help them make progress into and through university. The aim of the current study was to establish the challenges faced by non-traditional students entering university and clarify how a student passport approach could individuate and support their transitions.

Methods

Ethical approval for the study was sought and received. 9 first-year students studying at the University of Westminster attended one of two focus groups (one in-person; one online). There were 7 female and 2 male participants. 6 were international students; 3 were home students, one of whom was a mature student. All participants had sought additional help with language and study skills through Academic English modules provided by CETI. Participants received a £50 Amazon voucher for attending an interview.

The semi-structured focus groups were conducted by a staff member who did not teach any of the participants to ensure a teacher's position of power did not interfere with the interview process (Kostet, 2023). Participants were provided with a participant information sheet and returned written informed consent (see Appendix). Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and then transcribed by a text to speech service which was later edited to ensure accuracy. Student partners contributed to the starting questions which helped to initiate conversation and participant responses were coded for content according to the 4 major themes which emerged: Transitioning into University; Expectation Gaps; Adjusting to Academic Life; and Student Passports.

Results

An overview of the responses according to each of the 4 main themes follows:

Transitioning into University

Participants commented on how more practical information at the beginning would be helpful. This applied to both what happened within the university and also externally with practical issues like healthcare and food shopping. There was acknowledgement of the efforts to provide them with welcome info, but also recognition that this could be patchy and overwhelming in the way it was concentrated into 1 or 2 sessions at the beginning of the semester.

"We had a welcome event in the first week, but I thought it was a lot of information and in a really short time. So maybe it would be nice if instead of 1 big event there could be 2 smaller events."

Expectation Gaps/ Disappointments

When participants arrived at UoW, their experiences didn't necessarily match what they had known at other institutions or the expectations they had of what university life would be like.

"So it was pretty hard to meet locals. And now I only live with Students who are studying abroad." [an international student]

"I always looked at it that university was sort of a place that was out of reach for me. I really wanted to sit in a lecture hall and to do this cause I've seen it on TV, I was like can't wait to get into this lecture and get this real experience. And then I had my first lecture and I was like ohh is that it?"

Adjusting to Academic Life

Participants expressed how different academic life at UoW could be far more compressed than what they had been used to, particularly regarding the amount of contact time, assessment, and academic expectations.

"The only thing I didn't expect that I only have two days of uni. I thought I had three or four days

"Assignment method is really different. Here I have to write essays like a final assignment. But in [home country] I just take exams."

"I also think referencing is very important because I've never referenced some articles in my hometown in my assignment. So I totally didn't know how to reference the article and how to write a reference list."

Student Passports

Online access was preferred for a passport that could help to facilitate with transitions. Favoured content included practical information about life outside of university and broader life issues such as time management and work-life balance.

"Prefer online format..and maybe include work-life balance"

"Should provide more information about London...where I could, where to go buy groceries for example."

"I think organization and time- management is quite is very important"

Discussion

Participants' comments in our student focus groups reflected the difficult and sometimes stressful nature of transitioning into university (Duffy et al., 2020), particularly for more diverse

groups (Davison et al., 2022). The knowledge and expectation gaps which were raised by participants have also featured in past research, for example in relation to the ongoing (re)forming of identities when transitioning into and through university (MacFarlane, 2018).

Unlike this previous literature which has largely concentrated on deficiencies in the provision for transitioning students, more emphasis was placed by our focus group participants on the nature of information which was provided. Efforts to provide them with "useful" information was acknowledged, but the way it was conveyed was seen as too concentrated (mostly in 1 or 2 sessions at the beginning) and participants expressed a wish for an expanded range of content, both non-academic (e.g. where to shop for food) and for more life-skills (e.g. time management) which could contribute to their studies and life beyond university. The tailored passport approach was generally received favourably but it emerged that expanding the content beyond basic study information, e.g. into life skills and practical knowledge for life outside university, was necessary for it to have the greatest utility.

The obvious limitation of the study was the small size of the study and its 9 participants. The focus group also came at the end of the students' first semester, and it may be that more time to reflect on their initial experiences could have led to further insights. The focus group format was successful in eliciting detailed information, but it's possible the format selected more for participants who were comfortable to contribute in a group setting, and more detailed information could have been revealed in a 1-to-1 format.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Ultimately, there is no single repository of information that can serve all transitioning students effectively (Boubert and Fenton, 2024). The passport approach of individualising and potentially extending transition related content has been shown to be a beneficial response (Ryan and Morris 2020), and feedback gained from this projects' focus groups has provided further confirmation of student passports' potential. But there are important elements which need to be in place in order for passports to be effective and make a constructive contribution.

The first is ensuring that students' perspectives, experiences, and voices continue to shape the creation and evaluation of passport use beyond the scale of this small study. There are numerous inherent advantages of doing so, but perhaps most importantly students need to feel that a passport can reflect and serve their needs, therefore creating the motivation to actively participate in the potential benefits. Peer support and guidance can further reinforce and encourage participation, but this is unlikely to be effective without already establishing the relevant benefits (Crisp et al., 2020).

Another important element is that it is necessary for each student to create their own version of a passport, and it could be helpful to explicitly emphasise the broader advantages of this for both students and staff. Rather than merely "telling" students what they should know about their entry into university, a passport requires their active participation. Interacting with the creation of their version means that students will need to display a degree of agency (Klemenčič, 2017) and autonomy (Henri et al., 2022), 2 characteristics that may serve them well on their degrees and in future.

Dissemination

Dissemination could take place through 5 main avenues:

a) Student Union- provide a summary of the passport concept and selected previous results, along with an invitation to contribute content to and trial future digitised versions.

b) Academic staff- provide course/module leaders with a summary of this report, emphasising broader benefits (e.g. student autonomy) from passports and following up with workshops.

c) Professional services (international)- provide International Office/Study Abroad with a summary of the passport concept and selected previous results to seek their input.

d) Professional services (digital)- provide outline of study and proposal for digitized version to Digital Engagement team.

e) External colleagues- provide presentations/conference papers at e.g. Advance AE Teaching and Learning conference.

Reflection

The research team provided a useful range of experience and everyone was able to make a constructive contribution. Overall, there was general satisfaction within the team on the progress of the project, and we were able to meet almost all of our deadlines or find workable alternatives.

An important way that our team work could have improved is through more opportunities to meet as a whole group. Due to conflicting diaries and some team members only being at UoW for 1 semester, we struggled to find meeting times. This meant that useful input was delayed or lost, and time was spent trying to summarise or seek input from those who couldn't be present. In future, more prioritisation and planning ahead could help to some extent.

There was extensive student partner input surrounding the content of the semi-structured interviews, particularly the prompt questions which were used. In addition to this mid-stage, the project would have likely benefitted from more of their input on the early shaping of the research, with the expectation that this would have led to enriched data. Looking back, the academic partners could have done more seeking of views and less assigning of roles. With a similar project in future, would plan to initially canvas views on all aspects of the project, alongside establishing better what team members felt they could add to the project and how/when they would like to contribute.

References

Bolton, P. (2022). *Higher education student numbers*. Commons Library Research Briefing, 8 July 2022

Boubert, L. and Fenton, J. (2024). *Pre-arrival skills training: Bridging the gap between school and university*. In Garnham, W. (ed) Supporting the student journey into Higher Education: From offer to arrival. Routledge: London

Crisp, D., Rickwood, D., Martin, B., & Byrom, N. (2020). Implementing a peer support program for improving university student wellbeing: The experience of program facilitators. *Australian Journal of Education*, 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1177/0004944120910498

Duffy, A.; Keown-Stoneman, C; Goodday; J., Horrocks, J; Lowe, M; King, N; Pickett, W; McNevin, H; Cunningham; S; Rivera, D; Bisdounis, L; Bowie Chris, R; Harkness, K; Saunders, K. E. A. (2020). Predictors of mental health and academic outcomes in first-year university students: identifying prevention and early-intervention targets. *BJPsych Open*, *6*(3), e46–e46. https://doi.org/10.1192/bjo.2020.24

Davison, E., Sanderson, R., Hobson, T., & Hopkins, J. (2022). Skills for Success? Supporting transition into higher education for students from diverse backgrounds. Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, 24(1), 165–186. https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.24.1.165

Ecochard, S., & Fotheringham, J. (2017). *International Students' Unique Challenges-Why Understanding International Transitions to Highr Education Matters* (Vol. 2, pp. 100–108).

Formby, E. (2015). *#FreshersToFinals : From freshers' week to finals: Understanding LGBT+ perspectives on, and experiences of, higher education*.

Jääskelä, P., Nykänen, S., & Tynjälä, P. (2018). Models for the development of generic skills in Finnish higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *42*(1), 130–142. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2016.1206858

Henri, D. C., Morrell, L. J., & Scott, G. W. (2018). Student perceptions of their autonomy at University. *Higher Education*, *75*, 507-516. doi:10.1007/s10734-017-0152-y

Klemenčič, M. (2017). From student engagement to student agency: Conceptual considerations of European policies on student-centered learning in higher education. Higher education policy, 30, 69-85. doi:10.1057/s41307-016-0034-4

Kostet, I. (2023). Shifting power dynamics in interviews with children: a minority ethnic, working-class researcher's reflections. *Qualitative Research*, *23*(2), 451-466. https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941211034726

Lambe, S., Russell, A., Butler, C., Fletcher, S., Ashwin, C., & Brosnan, M. (2019). Autism and the transition to university from the student perspective. *Autism*, *23*(6), 1531–1541. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361318803935

Lei, J., Calley, S., Brosnan, M., Ashwin, C., & Russell, A. (2020). Evaluation of a Transition to University Programme for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *50*(7), 2397–2411. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-018-3776-6

MacFarlane, K. (2018). Higher education learner identity for successful student transitions. *Higher Education Research and Development*, *37*(6), 1201–1215. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1477742

O'Riordan, K., Jenzen, O., & Nelson, S. L. (2022). Liveability, environment and policy: Reflections on trans student experience of entering UK higher education. *Sexualities*. https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607221088148

Ploner, J. (2018). International students' transitions to UK Higher Education – revisiting the concept and practice of academic hospitality. *Journal of Research in International Education*, *17*(2), 164–178. https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240918786690

Taylor, G., & Ali, N. (2017). Learning and living overseas: Exploring factors that influence meaningful learning and assimilation: How international students adjust to studying in the UK from a socio-cultural perspective. *Education Sciences*, *7*(1). https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci7010035

O'Shea, S. (2016). Avoiding the manufacture of 'sameness': first-in-family students, cultural capital and the higher education environment. *Higher Education*, *72*(1), 59–78. https://doi.org/10.1007/S10734-015-9938-Y/TABLES/1

Ryan, S. –J., & Morris, J. (2020). Physiotherapy students' and practice educators' experiences of using placements passports: a tool to enhance collaboration on placement. *International Journal of Practice-based Learning in Health and Social Care*, *8*(1), 31–46. https://doi.org/10.18552/ijpblhsc.v8i1.540

Thompson, M., Pawson, C., & Evans, B. (2021). *Navigating entry into higher education: the transition to independent learning and living*. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1933400

Vincent, J. (2019). It's the fear of the unknown: Transition from higher education for young autistic adults. *Autism*, *23*(6), 1575–1585. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361318822498

Woods, K., & Homer, D. (2022). The staff–student co-design of an online resource for pre-arrival arts and humanities students. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, *21*(2), 176–197. https://doi.org/10.1177/14740222211050572

Appendices

PARTICIPATION INFORMATION SHEET

Title of Study: Non-traditional Students' Transitions- Passports to Success

Student Partners: Reo Hoshi, Carrie Jia, Simon Wolff

Academic Partner(s):   James Fenton, Laura Boubert

You are being invited to take part in a research study on ………., which involves establishing the most useful information for students starting or continuing at the University of Westminster

This research is being undertaken as part of the Students as Co-Creators programme. The study will involve:

- *Interviews as part of a focus group*

Please note:

- Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary.
- You have the right to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.
- You have the right to ask for your data to be withdrawn as long as this is practical, and for personal information to be destroyed.
- You do not have to answer particular questions either on questionnaires or in interviews if you do not wish to do so.
- Your responses will normally be made anonymous, unless indicated above to the contrary, and will be kept confidential unless you provide explicit consent to do otherwise, for example, the use of your image from photographs and/or video recordings.
- No individuals should be identifiable from any collated data, written report of the research, or any publications arising from it.
- All computer data files will be encrypted and password protected. The researcher will keep files in a secure place and will comply with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation.
- All hard copy documents, e.g. consent forms, completed questionnaires, etc. will be kept securely and in a locked cupboard, wherever possible on University premises. Documents may be scanned and stored electronically. This may be done to enable secure transmission of data to the university's secure computer systems.
- If you wish you, can receive information on the results of the research. Please indicate on the consent form if you would like to receive this information.
- The student partners can be contacted during and after participation by email w2023054@my.westminster.ac.uk.
- If you have any concerns about your experience of taking part in the research, you can contact the academic partner James Fenton by e-mail j.fenton@westminster or by telephone 020 7911 5000 ext 8988.
- If you have any complaints or want to report any incidents, please contact the head of school Andrew Pitchford: a.pitchford1@westminster.ac.uk.
- If you want to know more about the Students as Co-Creators programme, you can contact Studentpartnership@westminster.ac.uk

---

PROJECT CONSENT FORM

Title of Study: Non-traditional Students' Transitions- Passports to Success

Researchers: James Fenton Laura Boubert, Reo Hoshi, Carrie Jia, and Simon Wolff

I have been given the Participation Information Sheet and/or had its contents explained to me.	Yes ☐	No ☐
I have had an opportunity to ask any questions and I am satisfied with the answers given.	Yes ☐	No ☐
I understand I have a right to withdraw from the research at any time and I do not have to provide a reason.	Yes ☐	No ☐
I understand that if I withdraw from the research any data included in the results will be removed if that is practicable (I understand that once anonymised data has been collated into other datasets it may not be possible to remove that data).	Yes ☐	No ☐
I agree to an interview being audio-recorded.	Yes ☐	No ☐
I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in reports or publications arising from this research	Yes ☐	No ☐
I would like to receive information relating to the results from this study.	Yes ☐	No ☐
I wish to receive a copy of this Consent form.	Yes ☐	No ☐
I confirm I am willing to be a participant in the above research study.	Yes ☐	No ☐
I note that the data collected may be retained in an archive. I note my data will be fully anonymized and may be reused as part of future research activities.	Yes ☐	No ☐

Participant's Name: _____

Signature: _____   **Date:** _____

This consent form will be stored separately from any data you provide so that your responses remain anonymous.

_____

I confirm I have provided a copy of the Participant Information Sheet approved by the Research Ethics Committee to the participant and fully explained its contents. I have given the participant an opportunity to ask questions, which have been answered.

Researcher's Name: _____

Signature: _____   **Date:** _____