Exploring the parallel universes of staff and student transitions in higher education

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Following the publication of the Browne Review (2010), Higher Education (HE) in England is on the edge, being plunged once more into a significant state of transition. From 2012, the teaching grant paid to publically-funded universities will be cut and a tripling of tuition fees permitted. The implications of these changes are highly significant for new academic staff and students. Much has been written about student transitions into HE but far less is known about the transitional experiences of academic staff who themselves support transitional students. As changes impact, new academic appointments are increasingly drawn from a widening variety of employment backgrounds, with many staff working in HE for the first time. The University of Bedfordshire runs a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PgCAP) for staff new to HE. In undertaking this programme, new staff also take on the additional persona of first-year student. Feedback from the PgCAP therefore informs an understanding of the challenges facing new staff and new students. We also acknowledge a further group of 'new' staff required to move into radically new types of work-roles and who also transition into an alien world. Situated within the context of government and institutional imperatives, this paper explores the differing transitional experiences of academic staff entering a university and draws parallels with institutional approaches employed to support first-year students. An holistic model depicting the parallel universes of these staff and student transitions is presented.

Keywords: transition, new academic staff, institutional mechanisms

Introduction

Following the publication of the Browne Review (2010), Higher Education (HE) in England has been firmly positioned on the edge. The latest “litany of changes” (Hussey & Smith, 2010, p.101) has implications that are far-reaching for the future of HE in the UK. A sector already grappling with the ongoing challenges of relatively rapid massification, an ever diminishing unit of resource and the latest government austerity measures has now been plunged into a serious state of transition. Framed within this contemporary macro transition, this paper explores the increasingly parallel experiences of students and academic staff making the transition into HE and the converging processes and mechanisms that together characterise their first-year experience.
Within the context of these parallel worlds, the paper considers the support, resources and development opportunities afforded to new entrants at the University of Bedfordshire. The world of new academic staff is viewed through the lens of the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PgCAP). In undertaking this programme, new staff also take on the persona of first-year student, thus compounding the transitional process. We also acknowledge a second group of new academic staff, who have moved to a different institutional work-role in response to the rapid change culture. For this group, there can also be a significant transition into an alien world (Chappell et al., 2009).

The paper explores the consonances and dissonances of what we conceptualise as the parallel universes of student and staff transitions. The ideas proposed are drawn from the literature surrounding staff development, student experience and transition. They are also informed by an institutional re-examination of academic staff development and support for transitional students. We approach the subject from the viewpoints of three differing but convergent roles within the same university, those of academic faculty, staff developer and institutional manager and by our shared experiences of working with new academic staff on the PgCAP programme. The paper proposes an emerging conceptual model to aid understanding of the parallel universes inhabited by new academic staff and first-year students.

**Higher Education in transition**

In October 2010, the independent committee led by Lord Browne, former Chairman of BP, reported on the future of English HE funding and student finance. While major policy changes are nothing new in the recent history of English HE, it might be argued that no single set of circumstances over the past forty years has ushered in such impending change with very significant implications for the future of HE itself, its institutions and its actors (Ebden, 2011):

> On reflection, 2010 was one of the most turbulent and interesting years in recent memory for the HE sector. Recommendations from the widely anticipated Browne Review and Comprehensive Spending Review last autumn have now been adopted by the Government. These will have a lasting impact on the way our University operates for years to come.

The current boundary shifting centres once more on changes to student fees and funding. A possible tripling in the permitted fee levels has seen public protests on the streets of London, some twenty-five years after similar scenes characterised the Thatcher Government’s student fee proposals of 1984.

Since 1984, HE in England has been in rapid transition from an elite to a mass, or near universal system (Trow, 2006). Paradoxically the Government has imposed far-reaching fiscal measures at a time of the largest expansion in demand for HE that has been seen for some two decades. This demand is largely fuelled by students with non-traditional entry requirements (Coleman & Bekhradnia, 2011). This is already exerting additional pressure on how teaching and learning is approached, affecting both students and staff. Cuts to the unit of resource are not unprecedented, but this time the Government is also proposing to cut the grant paid to publicly-funded HE institutions to offset teaching costs. The implications of this have called into question the whole ‘idea of a university’ (Newman, 1899) and the value that society places on HE as a ‘public good’ (Kezar et al., 2005). HE in England is now firmly transitional.
The metaphor of transitions

In order to conceptualise parallel universes in transitions, it is necessary to consider both system and people transitions. Transition has become a ubiquitous term, and we now consider how the use of the transition metaphor itself can help to foreground both independent and intersecting aspects of the first-year staff and student experience. Meleis (1986) defines transitions as periods in which change takes place in an individual or an environment and which also possess certain commonalities. To translate this to the HE context, it is instructive to link Meleis’ work with three clusters of transitional theory.

The first cluster, used widely in a student development context, involves developmental change within individuals, proposing the metaphor of a specific trajectory (forwards or reverse) where actors pass through a linear series of stages, both psychosocial and cognitive (e.g., Goodman et al., 2006; Bridges, 2003). A second cluster, termed an ‘institution impact model’ (e.g., Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1999), focuses on the environmental factors that influence actors on how the resultant interactions between the actor and institution then shape the processes of transition. A third cluster, the ‘combined theory’ (e.g., Tokuno, 2008), suggests a juxtaposition between both the developmental change and institutional impact models to demonstrate how actors can be assisted through transitions. In order to understand more fully the transitions of staff as well as students in the current climate of wide diversification and continual change, this paper argues that consideration of organisational behaviours must be added (Schein, 2010; Watson, 2006).

Together these theoretical ideas align well with the core notion of ‘transition pedagogy’ (Kift, 2009), but in the context of this paper, applied to staff as well as students. All these theoretical frameworks have helped to shape our thinking in developing the conceptual model presented in this paper. First we consider briefly initial student transition into HE.

Re-visiting student transition

Much has been written about student transitions into and through the first-year of HE (e.g., Field, 2010; James et al., 2010; Kift, 2009; 2008; Tinto, 2008; Yorke & Longden, 2008; Krause, 2007; 2005). The growing canon on the first-year student experience already identifies a broad spectrum of factors which contribute to the consonances and dissonances of the initial experiences of HE. In our institutional context we have identified four key areas, all prevalent in existing literature on the first-year student experience, which in combination contribute significantly to the success of our own students. Figure 1 depicts these four areas as institutional, expectational, perceptional and operational. We conceptualise the four segments as rotating to intersect with each other at different points in the transitional process. As James et al. (2010), and others identify, the formation and subsequent management of aspirations and expectations play a key determining role in navigating the initial transition and in the quality of the ensuing student experience (Krause et al., 2005).
Far less has been written about similar staff transitions, and yet a re-reading of the literature on the first-year student experience invokes striking similarities with contemporary staff experiences. The summary depicted in Figure 1 can therefore be translated directly to transitional staff. For students and staff alike, managing commitments is key, with increasingly complex external scenarios of secondary jobs, family and caring responsibilities as well as navigating the varied demands of twenty-first century work and study. Accurate and reliable initial information becomes essential, whether concerning the institution, the academic programme or the support mechanisms available. Without the constructive alignment (Biggs, 1999) of these areas, unintended challenges are laid in the path of transitional students or staff. In more practical terms, we contend that the notion of ‘transition pedagogy’ (Kift, 2009) needs to become firmly embedded, and in addition, adapted to support new academic staff.

**Acknowledging staff transition**

As HE institutions broaden the academic and vocational nature of their offering, so the student population correspondingly widens in its demographic makeup and demands (Coleman & Bekhradnia, 2011). This contributes to challenges which fall heavily onto academic staff who are expected to operate effectively in a culture of ‘continuous change’ (Kondakci & Van den Broeck, 2009), aggravated by a reduction in the resource-base and increasingly multifaceted roles (Lawrence, 2010). For example, eight core roles were identified in Briggs’ (2005, p.264) “generic role model”: teacher, knowledge expert, consultant, researcher, team worker, counsellor, manager/administrator (of learning process), designer/planner, in addition to eight peripheral roles.
Role changing and confusion can occur within any particularly designated role (e.g., the nurse-teacher/lecturer role in clinical practice (Ahern, 1999)). New academic appointments are drawn from a widening variety of employment backgrounds and experiences with many staff making the transition into the working world of HE for the first time. They not only face a variety of demands (Nicholls, 2005) but are trying to cope with an amalgamation of transitions from diverse previous employment contexts in, for example: business/industry; school/college; non-UK HE institution; or traditional/new HE institution.

Before considering the transitions of new academic staff, we acknowledge briefly those existing staff changing to a new internal work-role in response to the rapid change culture. Such a move can also force a significant transition into an alien world (Macfarlane, 2011; Chappell et al., 2009). The existing academic may, for example, have to adjust to changes in their conditions of service, adopt a new leadership role with additional responsibilities, adapt even more to new technologies, and move further to student-centred learning approaches. Pressure is exacerbated by the increasing expectation of non-specialist teaching, applicable to both inexperienced and experienced staff (Elkington & Lawrence, 2011). Non-specialist teaching does not just apply to academics in England; Huston (2009, p. 5), for example, talks of college and university instructors across the USA “regularly teaching beyond their skill set and beyond their comfort zone”. It is therefore somewhat surprising to find little literature on transitions of existing staff similar to the work published by Harman (2003) and Smith (2009). Harman explored the transition of existing academics to a more commercial environment in an Australian setting, and Smith reports staff challenging themselves and stepping out of comfort zones where transnational education is concerned. Similarly, in his study of early-career academics, Kahn (2009) cites studies of research students with some teaching experience making the transition to early-career academic taking up a lecturing post. This adjustment is sometimes compounded by a move to a new institution or country.

Examples of literature on new staff transitions equally tend to be limited and fairly specific, pertaining to adjustments and struggles; for example, from practitioner to lecturer as found in school and nurse education contexts (e.g., Boyd, 2010; Boyd & Harris, 2010; Wood & Borg, 2010). All identify transition as challenging and requiring support. The complexity of transition is acknowledged, for example: “the oscillating nature of the transition for teacher educators” (Wood & Borg, p. 26). Here a career transition model more commonly adopted in business and management literature was adapted and applied to the journey from classroom teacher to teacher educator. Arguably compounding successful transition is when several transitions occur simultaneously. We now highlight one such example.

The Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PgCAP)

The Browne Review (Op.cit.) proposes that all new academics with teaching responsibilities undertake a Higher Education Academy (HEA) accredited teaching qualification; most English HE institutions already run such postgraduate programmes. For academic staff new to HE, the University of Bedfordshire runs the PgCAP. However, the content and effectiveness of these programmes has been debated (e.g., Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2009).

Staff undertaking programmes like the PgCAP face an increasingly complex scenario. Kandlbinder and Peseta (2009) pinpoint four pressures and pedagogical challenges faced by participants, namely: embracing a new discipline (Education); recognising the complexity of key teaching and learning concepts; translating theory into specific classroom contexts; and,
the problem of time to engage with the course. Participants also have to cope with the discourse of pedagogic development (e.g., Green, 2009; Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2009) and some find the academic demands of being a student quite daunting (Lawrence, 2010).

In undertaking the PgCAP, new staff adopt the persona of first-year student. By struggling to master a particular technology, manage group work or submit a piece of assessed coursework on time, a heightened sense of empathy with their own students is often developed. There are parallels with the role adjustment reported in the literature on school teachers returning to gain qualifications. Deikelmann and Gunn (2004), for example, report how teachers subsequently question their teaching practice. A further example emerging within a HE context is the scenario when researchers (such as professors/teachers or academic developers) try to understand the learning experience through an hermeneutic engagement with students (e.g., Case et al., 2010; Nathan, 2005).

**An emergent model of parallel universes**

The idea of transitions as presented in policy is portrayed as discernible events experienced in a linear sequence of progression through institutional and achievement structures (Bridges, 2003). In our emergent model, we view transitions more holistically. Transitions are rather presented as constitutive of individual trajectories, depicting non-linear developmental changes and shifts in identity and agency as people journey through an educational system. Such a perspective widens the lens of transitional work. We recognise academic staff as agents for student transition, whilst not neglecting the reality that staff themselves are also transitional beings, moving into and through the same educational system, albeit from a professional perspective. We suggest that the worlds of transitional students and staff can be depicted as parallel universes, sharing a common structural composition, but sometimes experienced in qualitatively different ways. The model we will present represents a fresh focus for those responsible for designing and facilitating institutional mechanisms to support transition.

Our overarching model of parallel dimensions of staff and students transitions (Figure 2) starts with the notion of a journey into and through the institution. Rather than suggesting a purely linear transition, though, the model is multidimensional. It is governed by a series of three rotating cogs, themselves moving within and through three central zones horizontally transected by *Thirdspace* (Soja, 1996). Depending on the exact juxtaposition of the cogs within the different central zones, various institutional mechanisms come into play. Staff and students must each continually negotiate the vertical central zones to progress. Equally, individually positioned and journeying within the cogs, staff and students will be rotating simultaneously, although not necessarily in the same direction or with the same velocity. At various points the cogs will intersect. Negotiation is then required at those times when the parallel trajectories of students and staff collide and momentarily co-exist in connective space.

At the initial operational level, three central zones exist: support, resources, and development (Table 1). These zones start to determine the nature and variety of transitional experiences for both staff and students (Table 1). The central zones also have synergies with the known characteristics that are key to shaping the first-year student experience (Figure 1).
The management of effective student and staff transitions requires equitable and sustained consideration of institutional support, resources and development structures as individuals progress through the HE system. Frame et al. (2006) argue that this may be difficult for institutions to manage, especially as some institutions appear to have identified only partially the scope and range of each of the structures within the three central zones. Additionally, institutions too often view the institutional mechanisms pertaining to student and staff support, resources, and development independently. They appear as isolated components of an educational system, when in reality each must function synergistically for an effective transitional experience. The parallel central zones outlined in Table 1 seek to address this, when translated into the overarching model (Figure 2).
In order for transitions to be successfully navigated by individuals and managed by institutions, the process needs to be steered by a set of transitional agents. We propose a set of three transitional agents:

- Communication (efficient, reliable, continuous)
- Information (relevant, comprehensible, accurate)
- Accessibility (physically, virtually, inclusively)

The transitional agents become the key determinants in the ease and manner in which students and staff negotiate transitions. That is, how students and staff move into, within and between institutional structures, both vertically and horizontally. Appropriately conceived, the

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Table 1: Mapping parallel central zones

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff trajectory structures, mechanisms, processes, and activities</th>
<th><strong>CENTRAL ZONES</strong></th>
<th>Student trajectory structures, mechanisms, processes, and activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Zone 1:</strong> Support</td>
<td><strong>Zone 1:</strong> Support</td>
<td><strong>Zone 1:</strong> Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-entry information</td>
<td>Pre-entry information and advice</td>
<td>Pre-entry information and advice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Induction: staff</td>
<td>Induction: academic and social</td>
<td>Induction: academic and social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer mentoring</td>
<td>Tutor and peer mentoring ('buddy system')</td>
<td>Tutor and peer mentoring ('buddy system')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty: academic / administrative staff</td>
<td>Faculty: academic / administrative staff</td>
<td>Faculty: academic / administrative staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central institutional support services</td>
<td>Central student support services</td>
<td>Central student support services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Zone 2:</strong> Resources</td>
<td><strong>Zone 2:</strong> Resources</td>
<td><strong>Zone 2:</strong> Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course documentation; handbooks; institutional strategies</td>
<td>Course documentation / handbooks</td>
<td>Course documentation / handbooks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Library access / guidance</td>
<td>Library access / guidance</td>
<td>Library access / guidance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Virtual Learning Environment (VLE); e-portfolio</td>
<td>Virtual Learning Environment (VLE); e-portfolio</td>
<td>Virtual Learning Environment (VLE); e-portfolio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central services</td>
<td>Study skills help/guidance</td>
<td>Study skills help/guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum framework</td>
<td>Careers counselling</td>
<td>Careers counselling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Zone 3:</strong> Development</td>
<td><strong>Zone 3:</strong> Development</td>
<td><strong>Zone 3:</strong> Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPD (Continuing Professional Development)</td>
<td>PDP (Personal Development Planning)</td>
<td>PDP (Personal Development Planning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PgCAP</td>
<td>Continued academic development</td>
<td>Continued academic development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing: for bids; reports; academic papers; research</td>
<td>Extra-curricular activities</td>
<td>Extra-curricular activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External courses/conferences</td>
<td>Work experience (Co-op learning)</td>
<td>Work experience (Co-op learning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional /vocational updating</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
transitional agents function to stimulate authentic student and staff engagement within the three central zones (support, resources, and development). The transitional agents act as positive momentum triggers in the context of transitional experience, allowing students and staff alike to make meaningful connections in order to fit into and with university life. Inappropriately conceived, these same agents can trigger negative momentum and eventual disengagement with the institution. As with effective curriculum design, transitions need to be constructively aligned (Biggs, 1999).

Finally, within the connective spaces created at the intersection of the three central zones of the overarching model (Figure 2) sit the transitions that affect individual growth and development most directly. This connective space, akin to Soja’s (1996) notion of Thirdspace, is applied in an HE setting by Whitchurch (2008). Within Whitchurch’s interpretation of a Third Space, the blurring of boundaries between students and academic and professional staff opens up a new territory and a coming together of different cultures, languages and assumptions about HE.

Moving from here to where?

Unintended consequences of the rapidly changing face of HE in England are ensuring that there are significant implications for institutions to adapt and change in what is itself a fluid, transitional context. Exploring the transitional experiences of academic staff entering, or moving roles within, a university when considered in relation to experiences of first-year students has revealed inconsistencies in institutional approaches. It could be argued that the existing canon on transition does not adequately address the question of whether institutions expect partial or complete integration and parity of initial processes for its students and staff, and what this means for both the individual and the institution. There is a very real need to discover what, during their initial and ongoing encounters with their university, encourages students and staff to integrate and immerse themselves within an HE institution or reject and disengage from it.

Developing a conceptual model has allowed us to revisit the theoretical basis on which transitions are understood, and to re-examine and unpack some of the complexities inherent within new staff transitions. Brew (2006) contends that traditionally the university is not an inclusive place but one tending to have disparate communities of academics, students, administrative and support staff. Similarly, we argue that there is a need for different parts of an institution to work together and to think more cohesively about the management of staff as well as student transitions. Our emerging model provides a basis for developing a coherent institutional framework, to support staff in transition. This framework would incorporate and extend the idea of a “transition pedagogy”, as proposed by Kift (2009) and later adapted for institutional student use by Corkill (2010). Building such a framework is arguably the “next, great first-year challenge” (Kift, 2008), particularly relevant at the present time of unprecedented change in English HE. This, we would contend, is a challenge truly issued on the edge.
References:


