

# A Qualitative Analysis of the Transition from College to University

October 2023

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## Introduction

As colleges and universities seek greater alignment in a tertiary sector landscape, focusing on the transition between college and university continues to be important. The recommendations from this work are aimed at creating a more seamless and supportive transition process for students embarking on their university journey. Through focus group and interview work, involving a range of college and university staff, seven aspects of transition are identified that could be managed more effectively to ease students moving between college and university.

This project is part of the [Mind the Gap? College Students' Experience of University](#) collaborative cluster - one of several collaborative clusters funded by, and part of, the Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme (running from 2020 to 2023).

The project employed two student interns, Sean and Rachael, both of whom were current undergraduate university students but who had entered university via the college route. In addition to their conversations with staff, the report authors, Sean and Rachael, provided their own insights from their experiences. Their personal reflections have enriched the findings from their dialogue with staff.

Our project involved engaging with staff members from two Scottish universities and a Scottish College, who shared valuable perspectives and insights based on their experiences with students transitioning from college to university. Through focus group discussions, we explored the nuances of this transition and identified crucial areas that require attention and understanding.

This report builds upon a previous [literature review](#) which examined the experiences of Scottish students transitioning from college to university. The literature review highlighted the sectoral impacts, academic factors, identity and social factors, alongside the logistical factors that students face as they continue their studies. The sectoral impact was understood as the misalignment between colleges and universities. In the move from college to university, students often experience a 'jump' where they change to an independent learning environment to which it can often be difficult to adjust.

The academic challenges present themselves in this transition where college students are unsure about the level of work expected of them as the workload becomes more demanding. Transitional students can find the adaptation to this new teaching challenging and this can lead to them being behind their university peers. Identity and social factors that are significant in improving the transition were recognised as having connections with their university peers as well as support from friends and family to improve on emotional wellbeing, which, in turn, made the transition less difficult. Finally, logistical factors of navigating the university - such as the campus, university systems, travel and new study - were seen to hinder the transition process.

The primary objective of this report is to highlight the key themes that emerged during the literature review and the discussions with staff, offering a comprehensive understanding of the issues faced by students during this critical transition phase. Each identified trend or theme will be discussed in a general format, providing a broader context, and subsequently, we will offer our own lived experiences and insights to provide a more personalised perspective.

By sharing these findings, our aim is to initiate meaningful discussions, promote awareness, and encourage further dialogue around the challenges faced by students transitioning from college to university. Ultimately, we aspire to contribute to the enhancement of support

mechanisms and resources that can better assist students in navigating this transition successfully.

Through an exploration of the themes and personal insights gathered from these conversations, we hope to offer valuable recommendations and suggestions for academic institutions, policymakers and stakeholders to create a more seamless and supportive transition process for students embarking on their university journey.

The transition from college to university presents many challenges as students navigate through a new learning environment. Moving from the familiar and often smaller class sizes of college to the larger and more diverse university settings can be overwhelming. Students find themselves in lecture halls filled with unfamiliar faces and may experience a sense of disconnection, making it difficult to establish personal relationships with lecturers or seek immediate support. Furthermore, the transition brings increased workload and difficulty level, demanding a higher level of academic engagement and independent study skills.

The transition is a significant milestone in the academic journey of students that coincides with increased pressure to meet elevated expectations, achieve higher grades, and excel academically, which leads to increased stress and anxiety. Balancing coursework, part-time jobs and personal commitments adds to the challenge, potentially compromising the work-life balance that students strive to maintain. Consequently, students may experience a reduction in confidence, questioning their abilities and struggling to adapt to the new academic demands. The combination of these factors creates a general atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty, requiring robust support systems to help students navigate this critical transition period effectively.

## Signposting

Inadequate signposting of resources at both college and university levels casts a significant shadow over the potential success of students. It is critical to note that assistance for students who grapple with financial, academic, and social difficulties is usually within reach, yet it is arguably underutilised. The core of this issue rests in the prevalent lack of awareness among student cohorts, largely owing to a less-than-optimal integration strategy, which can falter in delivering crucial information directly to the individuals most in need. Infrequent communication, or its complete absence, culminates in a student body largely oblivious to the resources that could enhance their academic experience.

While it may seem that the resources for students are merely a click or a conversation away, navigating that 'click' or initiating that 'conversation' with confidence can pose a considerable challenge. Particularly vulnerable students may struggle with computer literacy, rendering the process of seeking help online an overwhelming, perplexing endeavour. This vulnerability aligns with a common aspect of human nature - the apprehension and anxiety associated with admitting limitations - leading many to abandon their quest for help.

These factors underscore the critical role of effective signposting. Manoeuvring through a website to locate resources can be an unnerving task, especially for those less technologically adept. Delegating the responsibility of locating help entirely to the student overlooks the fact that this task can be a disconcerting hurdle. Educational institutions should be mindful of this when devising strategies related to 'student interaction quotas'.

At present, the primary avenue for information is the student email inbox, where newsletters or links to resources are sent. However, 'general' information can easily slip through the cracks and may not always be noticed by individual students. A viable solution to enhance signposting could be to clearly embed links to resources within emails or integrate them

within term induction modules. Requiring students to confirm that they have digested the information, a process that could be reiterated periodically throughout the term, could also significantly improve awareness of available resources.

While the responsibility of ensuring effective signposting primarily lies with the colleges and universities, students themselves need to shoulder some responsibility. If the institution designs a comprehensive 'signpost' encapsulating all available resources, and mandates that students acknowledge its review by ticking a box, this could notably diminish the current underutilisation of resources. By fostering a sense of joint accountability, students and education institutions can collaboratively work towards an educational environment where every student is empowered with the knowledge and access to the resources they need.

#### **Shaun's insight:**

'During my academic journey through both college and university, I was often left with the impression that discovering the various resources available was a task entirely left to the student. I personally used discretionary funding on several occasions throughout my time in college and university, but it was never introduced or recommended by the institution itself. Instead, I stumbled upon it by chance through a friend and took the initiative to investigate further on my own. The discretionary funding proved to be a lifeline during periods of financial strain as I worked towards my degree. Recognising its value, I've shared this resource with numerous peers - each one, irrespective of their college or university, confessed they had never heard of it.

This, to me, underscores a glaring deficiency in signposting, at least in the context of this specific resource. If such a crucial lifeline remains largely unheard of amongst those whom it aims to assist, it inevitably raises the question of how many other resources are being overlooked that could be making significant differences to students' experiences. I believe the issue of signposting could be addressed with a reasonable degree of effort and the repercussions could be substantial. Improving the visibility and accessibility of these resources would undoubtedly lead to an increase in their utilisation, significantly enhancing the student experience and potentially influencing academic outcomes.'

#### **Rachael's insight:**

'In my experience, I found it very easy at college to access the resources I needed to thrive, namely the disability services that the college could offer for my dyslexia. This was due to the fact I knew my tutors well and the college was contained within one building, making it easy to reach out for support and navigate the campus.

However, once I got to university, student support was only mentioned to me during my summer school and was rarely mentioned again by any tutors or lecturers I had during my four years. Throughout my time at university, I kept meeting people with disabilities who were unaware that the university could offer support to them. It became apparent that many students are not aware of what help they can get. This is a significant issue as it is often the students who are struggling, are the ones which need the most help and unable to access it.

The process of getting help can be difficult on a large university campus and a daunting experience to those with additional struggles. For those coming from college they will be used to engaging regularly with the same lecturers and peers, whereas at university they will find themselves in large classes with lecturers who see hundreds of students a day. This means that those struggling can easily fall through the gaps. Therefore, signposting support should be something that is made much clearer and accessible to all students to ensure that they are not further disadvantaged by this.'

## Student-staff interactions

The dynamics of student-staff interactions undergo a noticeable shift when transitioning from college to university. In the college setting, students often enjoy regular and personal relationships with their lecturers. The smaller cohort size allows for a more intimate learning environment, fostering a sense of comfort and familiarity. Students feel at ease asking questions during lectures or approaching lecturers after class to discuss any queries they may have.

In contrast, the university experience can diminish the personal aspect that is cultivated in college. Larger cohorts are often being addressed, making it challenging for students and staff to establish personal relationships. This can lead to reduced approachability, as the size of the cohort may appear intimidating. Contacting a university lecturer through email becomes a more practical approach, but it can prove ineffective due to slow response times and the potential loss of context in communication.

Furthermore, in college, students tend to have a personal connection with their lecturers that extends beyond academic matters. They feel more comfortable seeking help, not only with learning issues but also with personal challenges outside of classwork. However, within the focus group discussions on staff and student interactions, an important distinction arose. University students are typically checked on by the institution only a few times throughout the academic year. Mandatory check-ups with personal tutors are infrequent, and students are expected to proactively seek additional support on their own.

At the university level, when check-ins occur, they often have a limited time frame and primarily revolve around acute academic issues related to the current coursework. Broader concerns, such as financial or personal issues, are less likely to be discussed, and the scarce conversations are unlikely to lead to resolution or guidance towards a solution. This lack of comprehensive conversation can result in students underutilising the resources available to them, particularly at the university level.

To address this issue, implementing scheduled class meetings at the beginning of each term with student services could greatly enhance student awareness of available support outlets. This approach would not only tackle the conversation gap but also contribute to improving the overall signposting problem. Although responsibility does primarily lie on the student, academic institutions could reach out to students more often when sufficient resources are available and are at times underused.

Considering the infrequency and perceived difficulty of student-staff interactions, it may be necessary to increase the frequency of mandated meetings on specific issues at an individual level. By doing so, students who feel hesitant or lack confidence in approaching staff members would have a direct and regular connection to the relevant resources or individuals who can assist them with their concerns. This proactive measure would foster a stronger support network and ensure that students receive the guidance they need.

The following quote comes from a member of the widening participation team at one of the Scottish universities:

*'A lot of people have a personal tutor who they don't know because they are just assigned, so having the personal tutor go in twice a year and ask how everything is may not be enough. That is not due to people not caring or not doing their jobs, it may be down to logistical issues.'*

The quote summarises the issue of students feeling unable to open up to their personal tutor and have sufficient dialogue when they feel no relationship or trust has been established. The overarching issue is not that the resource of an outlet is unavailable, it is that the current format may not promote issues to be comfortably explored and discussed by the student. If the conversation is perceived by the student as an unfamiliar person asking how they are and running through questions on a sheet, then issues may be missed and unaddressed. The quote goes on to mention '*logistical issues*', referring to the fact that in the current climate, more frequent meetings cannot be scheduled without the student initially reaching out for extra support themselves. Limitations on the allocation of staff time and resources contribute to the prevention of meaningful staff-student check-ins as well as a decrease in frequency.

#### **Shaun's insight:**

'As a mature student, I found myself in a favourable position compared to some of my peers when it came to seeking help and support. I feel that older students do tend to have more confidence than students who have just finished high school or are in a lesser age bracket, and this is simply just down to having more general experience with people interaction. Seeking help does not seem so daunting when you view lecturers and staff as people whose job is to help you succeed. Additionally, the small size of my class, consisting of fewer than 15 students, made communication more akin to the experience of college students. Personally, I did not encounter difficulty in reaching out to student services and initiating dialogues that allowed me to feel heard and supported. However, I recognise that many students may not have had the same experience and would have greatly benefited from more frequent interactions with staff.

I believe that a once-per-term check-in is insufficient for many students, although some may find it satisfactory, such as myself. If academic institutions were to proactively ask students if they needed extra help or reached out to them on a more frequent basis, it would provide a more accessible avenue for meaningful conversations that ultimately enhance the overall student experience. While my own interactions with staff were overwhelmingly positive, I have come to understand that this is not the case for students at different universities / within large cohorts who find it challenging to reach out for assistance. Comparatively, college students generally express more positive opinions about their experiences with student-staff interactions which indicates that the university experience may benefit from a reassessed approach that involves resources being delegated towards making the students feel heard.'

### **Rachael's insight:**

'During my time at college, I found that I had a good relationship with my tutors and felt comfortable asking for help and making them aware of any difficulties I was having. I also found my class setting to be very comfortable as I knew all my classmates well. This dynamic changed when I transitioned into university. I found it difficult to get to know my tutors as I would only see them once a week for an hour. I was assigned an academic advisor; however, I only spoke with them once when I needed to change classes and never met them in person. However, as I was Registered with the disability services, I had regular check-ins from their team, and it was reassuring to know that staff were aware of my circumstances. I found the check-ins really helpful as it allowed me to bring up issues and get support, without having to navigate it all myself. However, I am aware that for most students in my course, they went through their entire four year studies without having a member of staff check in on them.

Changing from the college environment to university is a daunting experience and can be made more difficult when you don't have close relationships with staff. Therefore, I think it is important that students have a member of staff that they can reach out to and who will check in on them, to ensure that students are not struggling on their own. I understand that there have been debates recently as to whether universities should have a duty of care to their students and whether they should be providing any support. However, I do think a check in once a semester, to bring attention to any personal or academic issues and for staff to make students aware of the support that can be made available to them. I think this would be beneficial as a mandatory meeting to ensure that students do not miss out.'

## **Confidence**

Confidence levels of college students attending university was a recurring theme within the staff interviews. The transition from college to university is challenging and it is necessary for students to feel well prepared to cope with the changes, regardless of what year of study they enter into.

The setting of college is often a more comfortable environment for students and closely mirrors a school setting, as students will remain in the same class for the length of their studies with the same lecturers and peers. This environment fosters close relationships between students and staff, and provides students with the comfortability to seek and receive help with ease. Colleges are usually contained within a single building which, again, mirrors a school type environment where help is close by and easy to locate. There are criticisms that this does create a 'spoon-fed' educational setting that is not adequately preparing students for the independent learning that will follow once they start their university career. However, it can be argued that this type of teaching is necessary to give students the initial confidence that they need to get started in their higher education journey, particularly for those who have had a significant break in their studies.

As students enter university, either as a first year or a direct entrant into second or third year, they are often met with a culture shock. They move to a larger campus, spread across many buildings, they join a large cohort of students and will change between classes regularly. This is where feelings arise of not feeling ready, feeling overwhelmed and lost. The pressure of this situation is often heightened by the self-directed study and less contact hours with lecturers and not seeing their peers as regularly.



The change can be quite drastic for students and in order to help create a sense of preparedness and confidence for moving onto university education it is necessary that students know what type of environment they are going to enter. To mitigate these stresses in college students, it is important that they have the opportunity to attend open days, introductory sessions, tour the campus and view facilities. The earlier the students can do this, the easier the transition will be. Access to university facilities, such as libraries or attending university lectures when they are still studying at college could be beneficial. Some access courses already provide these accommodations and extending it to other courses would be beneficial.

As students enter university there is also a sense that they are starting behind everyone else, which can also affect confidence. This can arise when lecturers refer to course content from previous years when a college student may not have been there. It is important that direct entrant students have access to previous first and second-year course content as early as possible, whether this be over the summer or while they are studying at HN level. Familiarising oneself with university-level content early on, can help to reduce the stress of the unknown.

It is important to note that feelings of uncertainty and lacking confidence are not isolated to college students and many school leavers share the same feeling as they enter university for the first time. The only difference is that college students have these feelings at a later stage.

**Shaun's insight:**

'In my personal experience, I observed a prevalent lack of confidence among both college and university students, particularly among younger individuals. It was not uncommon for students to raise questions in our group chat, which consisted solely of students, that could easily be answered by approaching the relevant lecturer. Similarly, students would often seek validation or advice on their work, questioning whether certain elements should be included in their reports, which may seem obvious to others. This demonstrated a hesitancy to approach lecturers for help and a perception that seeking input from fellow students was more approachable. It also reflected a lack of confidence in their own work, leading them to seek external approval or guidance due to uncertainty.

I believe that the issue of confidence is particularly pronounced among younger students who may have less life experience, resulting in a lessened sense of self-assurance. Encouraging students to develop their self-confidence is an area that can be improved upon by fostering an environment where they not only feel empowered to approach others for assistance but also develop a stronger belief in their own abilities. By instilling a sense of confidence in students as individuals and helping them recognise their potential for success, we can address this issue and support their overall academic journey.'

### Rachael's insight:

'When I transitioned from college to university, I did not know what to expect when going to university. All I heard from friends was that there was 'no help available' and I would 'have so much work to do'. This filled me with anxiety and I really lacked confidence ahead of starting. As part of my requirements for going into first year I had to attend a one month summer school which involved taking three classes and writing an essay for each. The summer school was mostly students from colleges or other access courses and through this I had the opportunity to meet peers in the exact same situation as myself and this was an invaluable experience as I did not feel as alone. I attended daily lectures, in different buildings like I would be doing come September and would work independently on my essays in the university library. This gave me an initial sense of what to expect in a few months' time and also showed me that I was capable of going to university. During the summer school we were also signposted to all support available, such as disability services, academic writing support and so on.

Becoming familiar with the university environment ahead of starting my studies was hugely invaluable and truly helped with my confidence before I started. It gave me the opportunity to meet peers, engage in self-directed learning and give me the chance to independently navigate the campus. I think, where possible, such opportunities should be given to students to help improve confidence. I was the only person from my college class to go to University A and having the opportunity to meet other college students who shared the same feelings really made an impact.'

## Cultural perceptions

Another issue that was brought up is the cultural perceptions around going to university and college and the influence this can have on how students decide where to study. Oftentimes in schools, getting students to university is their primary focus and often college can be overlooked or even looked down upon. This can create negative conceptions of college that continue on past school.

Students may feel a sense of embarrassment at university as they are coming from college rather than school. It creates this sense that they are different and is something that can affect confidence. This is demonstrated by a quote from a Widening Access staff member:

*'They don't like being labelled as you know, coming from college. They just want to be students like everyone else.'*

Moreover, college students may decide on their university based on the cultural perceptions, such as deciding not to go somewhere because it is considered 'posh' or going somewhere based on the 'prestige'. Yet this should not be a factor in determining whether students go to university or not. A lot of the cultural perceptions around universities and concerns of not being able to fit in are often not the case when students actually go. This can be detrimental to students as they may end up in a course that they do not enjoy and can end up dropping out.

Therefore, in order to challenge these perceptions it is important that students are given all options of further education presented to them. For example, college students when completing UCAS applications should be encouraged to look at course content and support on campus, as well as what clubs and extracurriculars are available to them. Furthermore, it

is important that university/careers fairs at college are highlighting all universities and options to students.

**Shaun's insight:**

'There is no denying that university is often seen as more prestigious than college. Universities dive deeper into subjects, but both paths ultimately lead to a qualification that demonstrates a solid understanding of a student's chosen subject. Whether you earn a degree from a university or an HND qualification from college, it shows that you have the foundational knowledge necessary for the workplace. Breaking the stigma surrounding university versus college would help students take pride in their achievements in a more representative way. Every qualification holds value, and HND qualifications can land you an entry-level job just as effectively as a university degree. The true purpose of any qualification is to open doors to your desired industry.

In all honesty, I used to place more pride in my university status and qualifications compared to my college achievements. But upon critical reflection, I've come to realise that the education and lessons I received at the college level are just as important. I take pride in successfully completing both areas as part of my academic journey. It's time we shift our perspective and appreciate the value of all educational pathways, recognising that each step contributes to our overall growth academically and personally. '

**Rachael's insight:**

'I was the one of only two students in my college class to attend University B. It was not an option considered by my classmates who decided to look at universities such as Strathclyde, Caledonian and the University of West of Scotland. This choice was purely based on the fact that they thought they were too working class to attend 'B' and was not based on what the university had available to them.

Before I attended college I did not consider going to a university such as 'B' as I did not think the option would be available to me following college. However, after realising this would be an option through an open day at the college, I applied for first year entry.

Despite having to do an additional year compared to those who went into direct entry with their courses, I am very happy with the decision I made. I found the University was able to offer me course options that were not available in other universities, as well as a significant amount of societies to join. Alongside this I was able to undertake a 10-week internship at the Scottish Parliament, which would not have been made available to me studying elsewhere.

My biggest advice to college students would be to look beyond the perceptions of the university and find what truly interests you at each institution and base your choices on what they offer and not their name.'

## Independent learning

The shift from college to university brings upon a change in the experience of independent learning. In college, the knowledge learned within the classroom, leading up to a final examination, generally suffices for a student to secure a pass. Similarly, in university settings, lectures tend to offer the necessary groundwork for securing a pass. However, to achieve a high grade, a student needs to not just absorb the knowledge shared during lectures but also master the skill of efficiently sourcing literature from multiple channels, including reputable articles, journals and books. This additional reading forms an integral part of the learning experience and allows students to enrich their foundational knowledge.

Discussion on this subject prompted the following insight from a member of the University C widening access team:

*'I think that's quite a shock to college students because they're used to completing their work during class time. I don't think that you know that they have that much experience of having to work out with that time.'*

At college, the grading structure is predominantly pass-fail, with a particular threshold to meet for a pass. The introduction of graded units offers an initial exposure to a more nuanced grading system. Nevertheless, transitioning from a simple pass threshold to a complex and multitiered grading system can prove daunting for an unprepared student. This leap often incites substantial anxiety during the acclimatisation phase to these changes.

The feedback system also varies considerably between the two settings. While college feedback often lacks depth, university feedback is typically more comprehensive. It meticulously outlines the areas of strength and pinpoints the gaps in the student's understanding as reflected in reports and examinations. This comprehensive feedback system is vital in fostering independent learning, helping students understand where they need to concentrate their learning efforts.

At present, certain awareness-building opportunities exist for prospective students, such as open days or university visits, which can be facilitated by their college. However, these sessions offer only a glimpse of the university experience and are arguably insufficient for a student to adequately prepare for the transition. For instance, institutions like University B's mandate summer schools for some students before granting access to their degree programmes. Other universities offer similar orientation opportunities, albeit not as prerequisites for admission. These summer schools provide a more in-depth perspective of what students can anticipate upon entering university and arguably could be better signposted to college students, equipping them more robustly for their transition to higher education.

While institutions such as Universities A and C contend that a HND provides a sufficiently solid foundation for students transitioning into university, it is important to acknowledge that this transition is seldom without issue. For articulating or direct entry students, there tends to be a significant adaptation period that can incite a considerable amount of stress and anxiety. This stress could potentially be mitigated or avoided entirely with several pre-emptive measures. For instance, mandating a preparatory summer school, improving signposting of resources, and incorporating more personalised conversations with students at the college level about their post-college aspirations could allow for students to feel more prepared for this change in their learning.

Increasing the instances of one-to-one discussions would allow educators at college level to provide more targeted guidance and could serve as an additional channel for signposting

resources that might otherwise go unnoticed. These interventions would offer students a glimpse into the university environment, helping them understand what is expected and how best to prepare for their new academic journey.

The divergence in approaches taken by different universities underline a need for more expansive discussions about the transitional experience from college to university. Recognising that different strategies work for different institutions is essential, but there also needs to be a shared understanding of the common hurdles faced by students during this transition.

#### **Shaun's insight:**

'The transition from my second year of college to the third year at university occurred during the global pandemic, prompting a shift to online learning. However, this did not lessen the challenges of the transition. In fact, even though the total number of lectures I attended decreased at the university compared to college, the volume of coursework increased substantially. This increase in workload was so demanding that I had to reduce the number of shifts at work to manage my academic commitments and maintain high-quality work.

While I was somewhat prepared for an increase in workload transitioning into the third year, the intricacies of this change were not clearly explained at any point. The initial period was filled with adjustment as I came to understand that work could no longer be completed solely within class time.

Looking back, I believe that the orientation programmes that are mandated by some universities could have been beneficial during my transition, if only I had been aware this resource existed. However, I understand why students might overlook these resources, particularly over the summer when university concerns might not be their priority. I think that overall, the change in independent learning is something that students currently can adapt to within the first weeks of university, though improving the way in which students are made aware of the logistics of these changes may result in much less anxiety for articulating students.'

#### **Rachael's insight:**

'During college, I found that it was difficult for my academic work to improve as the feedback on my coursework was marked as a pass/fail/remediation. I was never given a percentage grade till my graded unit and the feedback was limited to the content of the essays.

At university, the marking scheme was very different and my work was now marked out of 22 points, always receiving a percentage for my grade and being marked on more than just the content of my work, such as structure, originality, referencing and so on. I had realised that college had not helped me to develop my writing as much as was necessary for university and I had not learned how to reference properly.

This feedback was useful as it allowed me to learn and develop as I moved forward in my course and I think if more detailed feedback had been provided I could have progressed more and found the academic transition to university less difficult. As I

went from an HNC to first year of university, I did not have to worry too much as it was only my final two years that contributed towards my degree. Therefore, I had the time to progress with my peers and did not feel so behind. However, if I had come into university in the second or third year, I believe this would have been a much more difficult transition as I needed the more detailed feedback in my first and second years to have the skills necessary to do well in my honours years.

I am aware that college courses are standalone courses and not every student who undertakes a HNC/HND will go on to future study. Therefore, it is difficult to require college lecturers to ask students to go above what is required of the SQA or to give them additional work with providing feedback closer in line with university marking. Therefore, I think it should be further explored to have access courses be more available as well as universities providing catch-up courses to college students. Closer partnership between colleges and universities would be largely beneficial to students to ensure that they are not entering university at a disadvantage.'

## What is mandatory?

Throughout the focus groups, there were debates surrounding what should and should not be mandatory for articulating students. These debates surrounded issues of whether students should have to take part in additional mandatory teaching or courses before attaining their place at university. Now on one side, there is the argument that if a college student has attained the desired outcome on their graded unit that the university has requested, then that should be enough to secure their place, as it is with school entrants. On the other hand, it can be said that additional mandatory classes can be utilised to bring college students up to scratch with their peers and make sure that they are entering university at the appropriate level.

Many universities currently run open days, transition events and even additional teaching help for academic study skills. However, a lot of the time these are voluntary, run outside of mandatory classes or ahead of term which does mean they are not utilised by everyone who can benefit from them. Some universities run summer schools ahead of the academic year to ensure that college students do not enter at a disadvantage; these can range from a couple of days to a month and can be highly invaluable. However, this can put a financial strain on students, who in this period would not be in receipt of student loans, bursaries and would most likely need to reduce working hours to do a course. Moreover, when additional help is only offered and not as a requirement, it will be underutilised as it may not be a priority for students who are having difficulties in other areas such as with childcare and work.

Therefore, it should be explored as to whether additional teaching can be incorporated into the curriculum as part of a mandatory course. Whether it be a 10-credit course or additional teaching in units that focuses on academic writing skills, this could be a highly valuable way to ensure that those who are coming from college are not disadvantaged. This will look different between universities and subjects but is something that is worth exploring as it was a recurring issue that was brought up through the research.

Further to this, to ensure that transitioning students are aware of help available to them - such as financial aid, extensions, disability services, as well as help with academic skills - there could also be mandatory meetings with staff such as academic advisers or tutors. Now this could be as little as one meeting a semester, but having it as a mandatory requirement can help to address issues sooner and ensure that college students are not disadvantaged.

**Shaun's insight:**

'As a student with an articulation agreement, the only requirements were to pass all exams from my first and second year at college and achieve a B grade for the graded unit. However, reflecting on my experience, I realise that there were additional opportunities available, such as an optional summer orientation, of which I was unaware. As a mature student, I initially felt prepared for the transition to the university environment. However, in hindsight, I believe that participating in a summer orientation could have better equipped me for the upcoming changes.

One challenge I noticed is that extra orientations like summer schools or pre-term sessions are not well signposted and may be ignored by many students who perceive them as unrequired activities. Nevertheless, I believe that investigating the possibility of mandating orientation programmes should be an ongoing discussion, involving both direct entry students and those who are articulating. By making these resources more readily available and encouraging their participation, universities can help students bridge the gap between different educational settings and facilitate a smoother transition.

I think it is crucial to encourage mandated meetings with student support services. Anecdotally, I have witnessed many of my peers missing out on valuable opportunities for help simply because they were unaware of the support services or too preoccupied with their coursework to seek assistance proactively. By mandating these meetings, universities could ensure that students are aware of the available support systems and have the chance to benefit from them when needed. This proactive approach can contribute to a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

**Rachael's insight:**

'As part of my requirements to get into university I was required to undertake a one month summer school programme in which I had to pass three classes to secure my place on my course. When I found out about this requirement it was definitely quite off putting as it meant I would need to continue to work part-time and would have a lot of additional work to gain access to the course. My travel for the duration of the summer school was paid for which alleviated some of the financial pressure. Once I started the programme, I found it to be highly invaluable in so many different aspects. Firstly, I was able to meet peers who had also been to college and would be my future classmates. Secondly, it gave me the opportunity to be introduced to my subjects and start writing at a university level and getting feedback, and finally, through the month, I was signposted to services that the university offers and what support I can expect when I start.

Overall, I really enjoyed my experience at summer school, as it gave me a chance to start transitioning into university life. Having this time to improve my academic skills and meet people really put me on good footing for starting. However, I know that this is not something that is possible for all students to attend or possible for all subjects to run. Yet, where such a course is available, I do believe it can really make a difference for students.

Through my four years at university, I have only once spoken to my academic advisor and was only made aware of support at the University through the summer school I attended. And I do think that this is an area that needs to be focused on across the board so students are aware and can utilise help available to them. From my own peers, I have been made aware that they did not know that they could get help from the University for their disabilities or financial difficulties and this is something that could be better addressed by mandatory drop in meetings.'

## Academic writing

Another issue that was consistently raised through our focus groups from university staff was the disparity in academic writing skills between college direct entrants and their university peers. Concerns were raised particularly around issues of referencing and writing at the same level as their university counterparts.

The marking criteria at college and university are vastly different and it raises the issue of whether college students who will later transition to university are getting the appropriate feedback to improve their work. HNC/D coursework is graded with a pass/fail; if the student meets all the criteria to demonstrate their learning, they will pass their coursework; if they are unable to meet all of them, they will receive remediation or fail. However, this type of assessment marking does not provide feedback on referencing, structure, originality, quality of argument or general writing abilities. Although college students are expected to provide referencing, this is not to the same extent as those who are at university; and if they are only assessed on whether they did or did not reference, they are not getting enough feedback to improve. For most college students, they will only receive a grade for the final piece of work - their graded unit. Some may get a percentage that they attained but that is dependent on their college lecturer providing them with such.

When students move on to university they are faced with assignments which require them to meet more criteria than the required learning outcomes, as well as find and utilise their own sources. They will engage more directly with academic articles and texts. For many this can be a large jump and affect confidence levels. They will be given a large set of criteria that they will be expected to meet. They will also be given a percentage for all coursework and specific feedback based on the criteria. This is what helps students to develop their learning and academic writing skills. Yet the concern raised as college students who are entering university, particularly for those in second and third year, is that they are missing out on this essential teaching.

This quote from a lecturer at University C, highlights that college students are not developing their academic writing skills in the same way as their university peers:

*'That's the main [issue], it is academic writing, it is kind of hammered into university students from first year onwards, things like referencing and the way that we expect them to write is different at college.'*

Now this issue does arise in part from the fact that Higher National qualifications are standalone qualifications and not every student who completes a HNC or HND will continue with their studies at university. However, many students do decide to continue on and this can result in them missing the years in which university students are required to meet stricter requirements, where they are given the necessary feedback in order to improve their academic writing skills. This begs the question of where the responsibility lies as to who should be teaching college students how to reference. Should colleges raise requirements



above what the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) set out or should universities provide catch-up programmes for students? It is a difficult issue and although there are no clear answers, the responsibility could lie somewhere in the middle - such as colleges providing additional feedback on quality of work, alongside universities providing college students with the means to learn how to reference and write academically.

**Shaun's insight:**

'In transitioning from college to university, my experience with academic writing underwent a significant transformation. While referencing was briefly mentioned during my college years, it was not emphasised to the same extent, and correct referencing was not a strict requirement in most writing assignments, if it was required at all. In fact, at college, I was taught to write lengthy reports that repeated information to emphasise the importance of a point - a technique that proved detrimental when I wrote my initial university report. The writing style I had been rewarded for at college, characterised by lack of conciseness, caused me to lose marks at university.

After receiving a disappointing score on my first instance of academic writing at university level, I made efforts to adapt my writing style to meet the new standard. However, despite my attempts to improve, the overall mark for that module did suffer as the initial report was a highly contributing factor to the overall module mark. Reflecting on this experience, I believe that had I been previously aware of the significant change in writing standards from college to university, I could have avoided such a setback. I believe this highlights the importance of early and clear guidance on academic writing expectations.

In college, the only instance where referencing and grading were addressed in detail was during the graded unit, and even then, only an overall grade was given without a specific marking scheme for referencing. Through conversations with my peers, it became evident that there was a frequent lack of understanding on how to reference correctly according to university standards. The only available online resource for referencing was a complex and difficult-to-navigate webpage, compounding the challenge. Although resources were available through student services, linking this issue to the broader challenges of signposting and confidence, many students were either unaware of these resources or felt they lacked the time to utilise them effectively.'

**Rachael's insight:**

'During my time at college, I was not sure how I was going to perform in my graded unit. This was felt largely because of the fact that all my coursework was graded on a pass/fail basis. I do feel as though my writing improved during my time at college, as I got used to writing essays again after leaving school a few years prior, and also starting to read academic text. However, I felt as though I could not determine how well I was doing without a specific grade.

When I transitioned to university, I entered into the first year of a four year degree. Therefore, I didn't experience as large a jump as students who skip ahead a year and, in hindsight, I do not think I would have managed well going into second year. It took me some time to get used to individual learning, reading academic articles and most of all writing university essays.

My first few essays I did not do as well as I had hoped in them. My feedback was focused on improving areas of using academic language and referencing properly. It took most of my first year to really grasp the basics of writing academically and using proper referencing. Looking back now, I feel relieved to be getting this feedback in the first year and not later on at a crucial stage such as my junior honours year. I think those who are articulating a year ahead from college need additional resources to make sure they are not struggling with the basics at a crucial stage in their academic journey.'

## Conclusion and recommendations

This report has identified the areas of concern in the matriculation process for college students, which have been raised by college and university staff, alongside drawing on our own experiences. We have further built upon previous research which focused on the transitional process from a student perspective. By focusing on staff perceptions, we have been able to better understand the difficulties facing college students moving into university education.

### Areas identified for improvement or further consideration

More signposting of services to ensure that students do not feel lost and are aware of help that is available to them, particularly as the information can be difficult to navigate. Increasing interactions between students and staff, where appropriate, to ensure that students are not being left behind and any issues can be identified and addressed early on. Staff meetings each semester would be a good way in which to increase student awareness for support services offered by the University.

Further exploration into whether mandatory courses such as summer schools or incorporating mandatory credits with a focus on academic writing can be introduced. Summer schools, of course, can increase difficulties of financial impact on students; however, they have been successful at institutions such as University B. Alternatively, having mandatory accredited courses where academic writing is the focus could be incorporated without adding a financial strain, as this would take place during term time.

Student confidence and cultural perceptions can be harder to address as these often are more personal elements. However, ensuring that students at college have all options presented to them and being made aware of support early on could help to tackle these areas.

Finally, the transition to independent learning and academic writing is often the biggest challenge students face as they start their university career. Again, building up support for students early on can make the change an easier transition, such as awareness of university writing and tutoring services as well as mandatory classes with a focus on academic writing. Further, sharing of resources such as access to libraries can facilitate students learning in a university environment early on, enabling them to become comfortable with reading academic texts as well as working independently.

The salience of these issues will vary across institutions and subjects; therefore, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to improving the transition from college to university. We do encourage faculty to identify the areas where they are doing well with assisting students with a smooth transition and areas for possible improvement.

Going forward, it would be beneficial for each institution to create a poster/graphic which acknowledges the themes identified in this report and includes the support available for each area. The posters can be placed around campuses and sent to students. By doing this, students would be able to see within one area all the help to which they are entitled, relieving pressure to find it themselves. This would also be a great opportunity for students in the arts to create the resources and encourage student involvement.

Published by QAA, and produced by the sector and QAA Scotland, this report has been commissioned by the Scottish Funding Council to support its duty to secure provision for assessing and enhancing the quality of fundable further and higher education provision.



Published - October 2023

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

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