

# Identifying and supporting the ‘transition phase’ in the student life-cycle.

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## **Abstract**

*The development of UCL’s Transition Programme over the last five years has led to a particular focus on engaging and then supporting incoming students from the two month period leading up to registration till the end of the first 12 week academic term. This five month ‘transition phase’ has become a distinct part of UCL’s approach to student support; it is understood and evaluated separately from the overall student experience, yielding reflections and data concerning the way learners form their early identities as students and institutional participants. This paper will explore whether it is possible or desirable to operationalise an understanding of this phase more broadly, within the context of wider institutional experiences and current research in this field.*

## **Transitional support at UCL**

Identifying and conceptualising a ‘transition phase’ within the context of the first year student experience has received some recent attention in this area’s professional literature, bearing a growing relevance for UCL in that our own experience has developed in this direction not deliberately but mostly through institutional practice (Currant, 09; Keenan, 08). The Transition Programme at UCL was piloted in 2005 as a proposal to embed more effective student support practices, in the context of being a research-led institution that made a commitment to widening access to less-represented sections of the community. As a result of the decision to roll out and embed the programme throughout the institution, supporting incoming first year undergraduates from the period leading up to registration and then through the first term has developed into a key aspect of UCL’s strategy for student support. Evaluating and reflecting on this phase of the student experience is therefore fundamental to UCL practices, a process that has yielded outcomes and data that may well prove useful to other institutions charting similar courses in transitional support. In particular, there are clear resonances here with the work of other institutions in the area of student engagement and how curricula are being shaped by efforts towards early learner engagement (Krause, 09); in the case of UCL this is best reflected in the development of academic skills workshops in term one and the earlier scheduling of opportunities for formative assessment. Whilst various support activities continue throughout the first academic year, the growth and development of the programme at UCL has led to a particular focus on the 4-5 month period either side of initial registration that we have identified for these purposes as the ‘transition phase’ for undergraduate learners.

The programme has now been rolled out to all departments that include undergraduates. There are 410 mentors and 20 senior mentors working on the programme this year, who receive training and pay for their roles; the latter are recruited having been mentors in previous years and are asked to take on a co-ordinating role in their departments. The programme includes various activities that aim to engage all 3500 first year students in some form: this includes mentoring, peer assisted learning, academic and learning skills workshops, information and social sessions, online resources and an academic diary. The

mentoring scheme focuses on the social and personal aspects of settling in to university in the first few weeks of term; these groups of 8-10 first years will then be encouraged to develop into Peer Assisted Learning groups, with the mentors as facilitators, in the second half of term one. The workshop and information session topics range from study skills, time-management and academic writing, as well as events and discussion about social and practical issues that affect students such as accommodation, finance, careers and socialising: this happens through talks, ice-breakers, university tours and virtual discussion forums.

### **Evaluating impact and effectiveness**

Our efforts to analyse and evaluate the early experience of first year learners are an integral part of the development of the programme. This is the case both in the particular sense that, in order to maintain quality provision in an innovative practice, it is crucial to feed back how users experience their activities; and in the wider sense, confirmed by other literature in this area, that university students form their identities as learners and institutional participants early on in the life cycle of their degrees, and the early transition phase is therefore a crucial period in which to engage learners positively both individually and in groups (Lawson, 2008). The clearest example of our effort to encourage and evaluate the engagement of students in such 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998) is the development of peer assisted learning groups at UCL within the first four weeks of term one. In terms of evaluation, our online surveys of first years and mentor/PAL leaders seek to benchmark the early expectations, skills and engagement levels of incoming first years and then to measure any impact that the formation and work of PAL groups is having on first year learners and mentors. By asking students to self-identify in terms of socio-economic category, and background we have been able to track noteworthy patterns amongst different groups. In addition to this we have been collating and analysing progression data for first years successfully moving into their second year of study, breaking down the departmental cohort profiles by ethnicity, socio-economic category and school type.

### **Differentiating outcomes**

In analysing feedback data from first years and mentors, we have found that the more interesting results shed light on how different cohorts and categories of student are engaged by the institution and the varying degrees to which their personal and academic development is affected by the Transition Programme. By integrating the feedback and progression data by categories, in order to differentiate by social background, our analysis has been able to track patterns in the specific expectations, impacts and developments of different groups of students during the transitional phase we have defined here. What emerges more generally from the data that has been studied is a focus on the key areas linked to the students' transitional experiences prior to, and following on from, the initial registration for their teaching programmes: specifically these cover student expectations of study and university life, personal and academic development, and social aspects of student integration. It has therefore been possible to identify specific trends within the five month 'transition phase' in question that help to illuminate the experiences of different cohorts of learners, allowing us to draw out some useful views about how students are forming their identities as learners and social participants at UCL..

### **Questions and issues to be raised during session**

Question 1: is it useful to identify a 'transition phase' within the first year of the undergraduate life-cycle?

Question 2: in terms of their own professional experience, are there specific activities or approaches that session participants would recommend in the context of supporting students pre-enrolment or during induction? What is the evidence base for these?

Question 3: would colleagues be willing to share proposals for support strategies and any evidence emerging from this discussion, in order to develop work in this area after the conference?

### **Session outline**

Feedback and progression data to be presented in the form of tables and graphs embedded in power point slides. Summary of this data with notes to be distributed to the session participants at the start. Discussion and feedback to be led by session leader, prompting session participants with open questions and common issues. Final 15 minutes of the session primarily based on group discussion. Assuming a five minute change-over time at the end of the session, effectively leaving 25 minutes for activities, an outline is proposed as follows:

0-10mins: outline of UCL's Transitional Programme, including examples of successful and less successful practice, first year and mentor feedback, and progression data.

10-15mins: discussion and assessment of pre-induction support initiatives, to be prompted by graphs and comments from UCL student feedback; discussion widened to session participant's own institutional experiences of any similar initiatives.

15-20mins: draw together a set of activities/strategies/approaches from participant's professional experience as well as UCL programme, where there is a consensus that good evidence would support such activities during the transition phase.

20-25mins: session leader to seek suggestions for an outline of a model set of transition phase support activities, prompted by session participants and suggestions from the previous discussion; use a white board to draw together a consensus amongst participants. Session leader to offer to share a fleshed out version of such an outline, and maintain an informal discussion amongst interested parties, with a view to sharing resources and evidence following the conference.

## References

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