

University is not as easy as A, B, C...: How an extended induction can improve the transition to university for new undergraduates

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Abstract

In recent years there has been renewed interest by British governments in school-university transitions. This article will focus upon one aspect of these transitions, namely the induction programmes offered by universities to their new undergraduates. In so doing, it will discuss the importance of introducing the student voice into the induction process, specifically the role that existing second and third year students can play in supporting the transition into university. It will argue that creating opportunities for existing students to share insights into their degree programme (and the wider university community) with new first year students (or 'freshers') is an invaluable addition to the induction programme – one which can aid student retention and which is complementary to the information provided by staff, rather than a repeat of it. In making this argument, the article will report upon the new Extended Induction to Geography programme that the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology (GPS) at Newcastle University piloted for the first time in September 2011.

Keywords

extended induction, student voice, mentoring, youth transitions, guidance, learner support

Introduction

This article will discuss the importance of introducing the student voice into the induction process for new undergraduates – specifically the role that existing second and third year students can play in supporting the transition of these undergraduates into university. It will argue that creating opportunities for existing students to share insights into their degree programme (and the wider university community) with freshers is an

invaluable addition to any induction programme – one which is complementary to the information provided by staff, rather than a repeat of it. In making this argument, the article will consider the importance of extending the induction period beyond its traditional week long slot at the start of each academic year and report upon the new *Extended Induction to Geography* programme that the School of GPS at Newcastle University piloted for the first time in September 2011. Whilst the context of this discussion is discipline specific, the challenge of promoting student retention and encouraging students to make the transition to university successfully are by no means unique to geography. Other degree programmes face similar transitional issues and it would appear that creating an extended induction period has wider application, being easily moulded to suit the needs of many disciplines.

The importance of hearing students' voices within induction

In recent years there has been renewed interest by British governments in school-university transitions. In June 2007 Gordon Brown established The National Council for Educational Excellence (NCEE) with a remit to contribute to raising standards in schools. Reporting in October 2008, the NCEE advocated the establishment of much closer school-university links and recommended that all higher education institutions should produce strategies for widening participation and supporting their local schools, including arrangements for improving school performance (NCEE, 2008). While this is worthwhile, the main focus of the subsequent policy initiatives in government and HEIs to date seems to have been on the application of these recommendations to STEM subjects (see for example, Goodfellow and Coyne, 2008).

Outside of this process, the issue of how to improve the transition between school and university has been actively discussed within academic geography for some time: 'university and pre-university geography in this country are like distant relations: there is a family connection but it is fairly weak' (Castree, Fuller and Lambert 2007, p. 130). Amongst academic geographers interest has tended to fall into two discrete strands. The first addresses the issue of the growing divide by questioning 'What is Geography?' (Bonnett, 2008) and discusses the perceived disjunction between the different types of geography that prevail in schools and universities. For example Professor David Lambert, Chief Executive of the Geographical Association, recently lamented the fact that:

'It is true that school geography became somewhat 'stuck' (Lambert, 2004) and in some ways dangerously disconnected from the wider academic discipline' (Lambert 2011, p. 5; Prykett and Smith 2009; Castree et al. 2007; Marriott, 2007; Stannard, 2003).

The second strand within the literature on the school-university transition within geography has focused on the potential to redress the increasing divide by forging new partnerships between schools and universities. Research in this area seeks to improve the school-university transition by improving dialogue between geography teachers and lecturers (see for example, Imrie and Cowling, 2006; Jeffrey, 2003; Birnie, 1999). Much of this debate is worthwhile and imbued with an appreciation of the practical realities of teachers and academics finding the time to commit to such endeavours: for example Prykett and Smith (2009) discuss a range of options from informal seminars and continuing professional development courses, through to MAs which would update and expand geography teachers' subject knowledge; while Stannard (2003, p. 320) suggests that *'academic geographers have a great deal to contribute in any debate over the content of school geography'*.

In this article we want to address a third, more practical, aspect of the transition – namely the contribution which the induction period at university can make in easing the move from further to higher education. According to the work of Cock et al (who researched a five week extended induction programme, at a North West of England HE institution) extended induction is effective in aiding school-university transition as:

'The integration of intensive, supported activities combining individual, social and academic perspectives of the early weeks of University life, has elicited an encouragingly successful programme'. (Cock et al. 2008, p. 40)

But how can you define what Cock et al refer to as 'unsuccessful' and 'successful' programmes? Collating feedback over the last few years, common complaints levelled by many students against the induction programmes they endured have included information overload on the day (or week) of arrival and subsequent problems with boredom and the retention of so much information. Extending the induction programme over the first few weeks of term goes a long way towards overcoming these issues; while allowing students more discussion time creates a better atmosphere of community belonging. Citing the examples of (Johnson, 2002; Etter, Burmeister and Elder 2001; Jacques 2000), we can see support for extending

the induction process to provide what Cock *et al* (2008, p. 37) believe to be a 'valuable instrument in the integration process'.

Yet, we would argue that there is merit in going further than this by not only extending the induction process but doing it in such a way as to create opportunities for the existing student voice to be heard. To follow the pedagogical argument, within our sub-discipline of youth geography we have seen explicit calls in the last few years for greater participatory involvement in research and the rise to prominence of the necessary participatory research methods to facilitate this (see for example, Kesby, Pain and Kindon 2005; Pain 2004; Breibart 2003; Pain and Francis 2003; Kesby 2000). One of the authors recently took this call into a course with the Staff Development Unit (SDU) at Newcastle University which focussed on self-reflective teaching practices and enhancing students' learning experiences. It was these factors which acted as stimuli in departmental talks about instigating a planned extended induction period, utilising existing resources and, in doing so, improving elements of current teaching and learning.

The reason why – as Pain (2004, p. 654) puts it – 'bringing in new voices' is important is that:

'...these techniques enabled students to contribute their understanding, experiences and knowledges to debates about youth transitions'

(Hopkins 2006, p. 245).

Taking this a stage further, it seems apposite for participatory involvement by students to be also adopted more widely within university teaching. Most of what we have read has been primarily concerned with participatory research, and in the writing of this article we hope to begin to redress the balance. We acknowledge that Hopkins and Pain were working within a specific context, unique to that institution and unique to the individual students involved. Nevertheless, reflecting on this research only serves to reinforce the value of trying to increase the opportunities for existing students to participate in peer teaching, the voice of whom provides a fresh, distinctive perspective, rather than repeating what other voices have to say. In stating this, we concur with the conclusions of Sober (2011) who outlines four key benefits: 1. to harness the knowledge of experienced learners and provide opportunities to disseminate this to new students; 2. to make learner self-reflection more applied and purposeful and enhance their understanding of the process; 3. to facilitate a form of group mentoring between different course levels and student cohorts; and 4. to use the student voice and creative skills of

students to produce learner guides that are accessible to other students. In the next section we provide a practical example of such participatory involvement by students in teaching, through a discussion of *the Extended Induction to Geography* programme that the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology (GPS) at Newcastle University piloted for the first time in September 2011.

The Extended Induction to Geography pilot scheme at Newcastle University, 2011

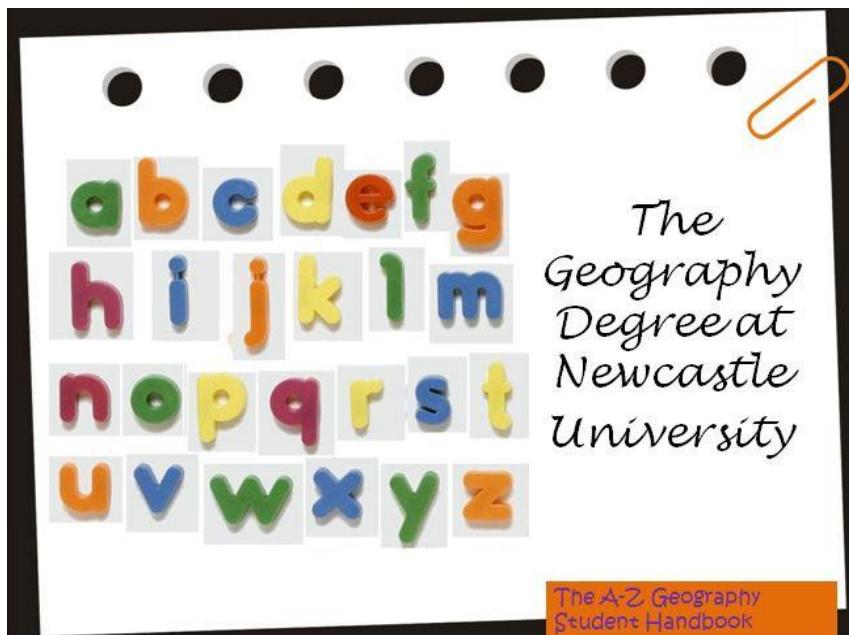
The Extended Induction to Geography (EI) 2011 pilot scheme at Newcastle University has been structured as a series of formal and informal lectures, seminars, workshops, tutorials and mentor meetings which run from fresher's week through to its culmination with a first year residential fieldtrip for staff and students to the Lake District in teaching week 5. Each year the School of GPS recruits 15-20 existing geography undergraduates to act as volunteer mentors to incoming students and a bolstered role for these mentors will become central to the new EI pilot scheme. To date recruitment of mentors has never been a problem, even though we ask second and third year students to apply by email to the Degree Programme Director before the summer holidays, writing a paragraph about why they want to take on the role from September. In theory this process allows staff to vet applicants. In reality it seems to put off those students who are not fully committed and leaves us with about the right number students, all of whom are dedicated to the mentoring role. Reasons given for volunteering as a mentor are sometimes altruistic, but mainly revolve around CV development and the acquisition of transferable skills. Many (but by no means all) applicants intend to apply for PGCE programmes and see the mentoring role this as worthwhile additional experience that they can include in their personal statement. All mentors are volunteers and so the only cost to the department is for 15-20 distinctive hoodies. Mentors are asked to wear these as much as possible during the extended induction period so that they are clearly identifiable to first year students on and around the campus.

Student mentors support the department's more formal teaching within the first year core module *Geographical Study Skills*. This module is taught across the first year by academic tutors in the form of one hour sessions, once a week. Delivered in tutor groups of ten students, the aim of the module is to provide a transition from the styles of teaching and learning used in schools to those used in universities. It does this by helping new first year students to acquire the study skills and transferable skills needed to successfully complete a geography degree. For the first time, we gave each

mentor a clearly defined role of supporting one tutor group each. To facilitate this, mentors led the last quarter of an hour of two *Geographical Study Skills* sessions during the extended induction period (weeks 2 and 3). Here the student mentors acted as a helping hand, a sounding board to listen to questions and concerns from the new students, which enhanced their learning experience. For this to work effectively, and avoid any awkwardness, the member of staff leading the first 45 minutes of these sessions were primed in advance to leave the room. In so doing we front loaded the learning within the module, broadening its aims away from just the academic transition of students to university as '*it is only students who feel connected to the university who persist in their studies*' (Scanlon, Rowling and Weber 2007, p. 226; Bidgood, Saebi and May, 2006; Christie, Munro and Fisher 2004; Brooks 2002; Thomas 2002; Smith and Naylor 2001; Ozga and Sukhnandan 1998).

In addition, as part of this new extended induction programme, *The A-Z Geography Student Handbook* has been developed as a way for existing students to pass practical advice, hints and tips about making the transition to university onto the new intake of geography undergraduates. Produced by the mentors themselves, it is hoped that this written expression of the student voice will both increase the effectiveness of the mentor meetings and be a useful addition to the usual staff perspective which has tended to dominate previous, shorter induction periods. The idea for this handbook draws its inspiration from Richard Sober's presentation at the *3 Rivers Learning and Teaching Conference*, held at Northumbria University in April 2011 (see Figure 1). From this initial impetus, the creation of the handbook has been student led with the emphasis being to encourage student mentors to reflect on all aspects of the geography degree at Newcastle University and to produce a document for the next generation of first years. The printed handbook was used by mentors as a tool to facilitate two longer (but more informal, off-timetable, off-campus) meetings with their groups in week 1 and week 4 and to support their shorter weekly 15 minute meetings at the end of *Geographical Study Skills*. In the future there will also be an interactive version of the handbook accessible via Blackboard (Newcastle University's VLE). It is hoped that the combination of the handbook and regular meetings will give a clarity, purpose and structure to the existing geography student mentoring roles. These roles were previously not fully utilised in enhancing student learning and developing them embeds student representation and the student voice at the heart of the induction process. Mentor meetings ceased at the end of week 4, with the residential fieldtrip in week 5 providing a natural breakpoint.

Figure 1: The front cover of the A-Z Geography Student Handbook at Newcastle University (Image provided by Richard Sober).



The benefits of extended induction for new and existing undergraduate students

The idea of extending the induction period for new geography undergraduates at Newcastle University responds to five thematic priorities established by the Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES) Subject Area (GEES, 2011). Firstly, it promotes *active learning*. In addition to their regular mentor meetings, students experienced 'taster sessions' during the weekly *Community Tuesdays* meetings, offering insights into different aspects of geography. The aim of these sessions was to give each student a rounded view of the discipline's form and scope in higher education, bring the subject matter to life and giving students a better understanding of geography's wider relevance and contribution to contemporary real world issues. *Community Tuesdays* is a pre-existing idea within the School of GPS which has been incorporated into extended induction. It is a two hour time slot from 4-6pm every Tuesday afternoon, during which no teaching is timetabled. This affords a weekly opportunity in which all members of the geography community (staff and students) can come together to share in both academic and non-academic community building activities. With sessions uniting the whole department, there are also social opportunities to enhance learning through peer advice and guidance.

These sessions promote active learning both horizontally across geography's sub disciplines and vertically between various strata of academia:

'The argument is that the introduction of reflective learning practices to first-year students has an impact on their performance, transforming many passive student listeners into proactive, enthusiastic learners'
(Bryson 1997, p. 163).

The idea to roll out *The A-Z Geography Student Handbook* as part of the extended induction programme should also improve existing students' employability, scholarship and professional development. Within the School of GPS a final year student is already employed as a *Geography Ambassador*. This part-time (paid) role has a varied job description including sitting on the staff-student committee, writing the geography newsletter, conducting outreach/recruitment activities with local schools, as well as leading the mentoring programme and acting as a liaison between staff and the student mentors. *The A-Z Geography Student Handbook* has been produced by a team of the student mentors led by this *Geography Ambassador*. Having students critically engage with their own skill-set is important (Haigh and Kilmartin, 1999) and holding either the position of unpaid student mentor or that of the *Geography Ambassador* offers opportunities for the development of transferable skills and CV development, both of which have positive knock-on consequences for these students' employability. Extended induction therefore works for both staff and students – along with enhancing the learning experience and easing students' transitions into higher education, it could also enhance graduate skills development and employability.

The fourth GEES theme that the new *Extended Induction to Geography* programme promotes is that of improving *learning, teaching and assessment*. Having part of the extended induction programme delivered by mentors, supported by their own mentoring handbook, allows a more effective mode of delivery for some key content. The importance of positionality has been established as an important theme in a lot of social and cultural geography research (Soderstrom 2011; Hankins and Yarbrough 2009; Gaskin and Hall 2002; Sidaway 2000; England 1994), and applying this concept to the idea of extended induction it becomes apparent that there are some aspects of making a successful transition to university which are better addressed by existing students than staff. As Furr (2011, online) reminds us, 'the critical element of education is the social element' and that universities have the potential to play a 'crucial role to curate and guide'. Yet, we must ask

whether academic tutors are always best placed to act as guides, particularly when so many of the problems experienced by freshers are not academic in nature? Given their positionality, and the staff-student power relations which ensue, to what extent can academic staff empathise and provide real-world solutions to freshers' problems, without appearing patronising or out of touch? It is perhaps a less daunting alternative for new undergraduates to admit self-doubts to their peers, and therefore having the voice of existing students heard loudly can enhance learning and teaching throughout the induction process.

The final priority identified by GEES concerns *recruitment, transition and retention*. Student retention has become a pressing issue for universities, as withdrawal rates have an impact on university resources and the overall reputation of the university (Thomas 2002). Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) identify the dramatic expansion in the number of students (despite the decline in financial support) and the increased diversity of students (in terms of their socio-economic background and age) as major factors influencing dropout rates. However, a study by Yorke (2000) of 979 students from six institutions goes further, arguing that student withdrawal from university can be put down to seven main factors: 1. wrong choice of course; 2. unhappiness with the environment of the institution; 3. dissatisfaction with aspects of institutional provision; 4. inability to cope with the demands of the course; 5. poor quality of the student experience; 6. financial and interpersonal problems; 7. lack of peer support. Many of these factors can be grouped together to reinforce the importance of social integration to student retention. This is also highlighted by Wilcox, Winn and Fylie-Gauld (2005), who emphasise the need for students to make social connections as early as possible within their degree. Without this support students can feel isolated and emotionally destabilised by their new environment. Although in many cases this is overcome relatively quickly, it can also produce a crisis point at which a student decides to withdraw only a matter of days or weeks into their new course. Student interaction with lecturers and tutors is important at this time (Hill, Lomas and MacGregor 2003), although Scanlon et al (2007) observe how the inevitable unavailability of lecturers at certain times can mean that occasionally there is a lack of support when needed. The findings of Scanlon et al chime with the work of Hopkins (2006) who observes that, whilst many academics are capable of exerting great influence over how youth transitions are experienced, 'with the increasing of research funding and publishing (such as the RAE in the UK), academics are often pressurised into prioritising research...' (Hopkins, 2006, p. 246). At this point it is also apposite to refer to the issue of positionality highlighted above, and ask whether in any case staff

are always best placed to deal with the transitional problems faced by their new undergraduates. Let us say clearly that we are not advocating student participation during induction as a replacement for staff interactions - but it does seem as if there is a lacuna in the literature which fails to consider if there is a role for existing students in aiding the transition and retention process of new undergraduates.

It is this gap in university induction which we hope to begin to fill. Whilst the context for the discussion is discipline (geography) and institution (Newcastle University) specific, it is apparent that the challenges of promoting student retention and encouraging students to make the transition to university successfully are by no means unique to geography departments. Students in other subjects face similar transitional issues and it would appear that creating an extended induction period and a mentoring handbook have wider application, being easily moulded to suit the needs of many disciplines. They will not by themselves solve transitional problems, but they can make a significant contribution to ameliorating several of the factors identified by Yorke (2000) and Wilcox et al (2005).

Concluding thoughts: the role of extended induction and the student voice within the wider context of current changes to higher education

As part of the forthcoming rise in tuition fees, the Higher Education Funding Council has announced that (amongst other requirements) universities will have to publish more details of satisfaction ratings from previous students – through the provision of a Key Information Set (KIS) and an enhanced National Student Survey (NSS). Despite these requirements, it seems to us that there is a world of difference between ‘knowledge about’ a university which is readily available in prospectuses, city guides, websites and other online resources and what extended induction, student mentors and a student-written handbook can provide. Schutz (1964, p. 94) explains the latter’s importance in terms of providing ‘contextually tested knowledge’, ‘trustworthy recipes’ and ‘routine procedures’ which all equate to ‘insider knowledge’. There is a need to provide new students making the transition to university with more usable information and, as we have shown, there are consequently sound pedagogic reasons for including our existing undergraduates within the induction process.

A fuller evaluation of the effectiveness of our extended induction and the degree to which we have improved the transition to university for new undergraduates can only take place at the end of this academic year. At that juncture we will be better placed to gather feedback from all involved,

including staff, mentors and of course the first year students themselves. We will base this on module evaluations as well as verbal feedback and the drop out rates from this student cohort. However, informal and anecdotal feedback gathered at the end of the extended induction period for first year students indicates a rise in approval ratings compared to previous first year induction programmes (on average scoring 4.2 out of 5). The first year extended induction programme also scored higher satisfaction ratings than our second and third year induction arrangements. However, having reflected on this process ourselves, next year we will revisit whether 15 minutes at the end of Geographical Study Skills is an appropriate juncture for mentoring to take place, or whether it would be better to set aside an entire hour-long session for this process. In addition, it was noticeable that engagement by first year students with the mentoring process outside of the 15-minutes of dedicated class time was highly variable. Reviewing this aspect of the programme, it seems as if this was less problematic, as it allowed students to tailor the learning experience to their individual transitional needs.

Currently, with rising tuition fees, university recruitment faces increased competition and it is clearly possible to market initiatives like extending the induction period as providing more 'value for money' from a student's degree costs, whilst helping to ensure that vital teaching revenue is not lost through poor student retention early in degree programmes. We are reluctant to make, let alone major, this argument as our emphasis, motives and enthusiasm for this project have never been driven by 'learning as a commodity'. We are however wary of the perception it can create: namely that staff teaching 'burdens' are being passed onto unpaid student mentors. While aware of these dangers, we would contend that (if well managed) extending the induction period for new undergraduates and facilitating existing undergraduates to support their transition to university is vital. Indeed our experiences suggest that EI can increase both the engagement of first year students and student mentors with their degree programme, creating a sense of community amongst those who choose to engage with the mentoring process fully.

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