

Improving the transition to university: introducing student voices into the formal induction process for new geography undergraduates

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Abstract

Recently, there has been renewed interest in the area of school to university transitions within geography. This article focuses upon one aspect of these transitions, namely the induction programmes offered by universities to their new undergraduates. It argues in favour of extending the length of the induction period currently offered by many institutions and incorporating student voices into the induction process through peer mentoring. In making this argument, the article will report upon the new *Extended Induction to Geography* programme that Newcastle University piloted for the first time in 2011-12.

Keywords

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

Introduction

In recent years there has been widespread recognition, within the *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* (and within the academic literature more generally), of the transitional issues British students face when moving from studying A-level to studying degree-level geography. Indeed, as Castree, Fuller & Lambert observe, 'university and pre-university geography [in the UK] are like distant relations: there is a family connection but it is fairly weak' (Castree, Fuller & Lambert, 2007, p.130). The debate about how to improve this situation ranges in focus, from changing the content of A-level curricula (Castree, Fuller & Lambert, 2007); via improved dialogue between teachers and lecturers (Birnie, 1999; Imrie & Cowling, 2006; Jeffrey, 2003); to addressing more fundamental questions about the definition of contemporary geography (Bonnett, 2008), and the perceived disjuncture between the different types of geography that prevail in schools and universities (Castree, Fuller & Lambert, 2007; Marriott, 2007; Prykett & Smith, 2009; Stannard, 2003).

While research on transitions should always be welcomed, somewhat overlooked within the existing corpus of literature is the way in which first-year geography students themselves understand this transition to university. A notable exception is Alan Marriott's (2007) *Geographical Association* research with 12 undergraduate geographers. While Marriott's work was insightful, it appeared in a journal aimed at teachers but read by few academics. Therefore, while it may have encouraged teachers to reprioritise

the importance of preparing students for university, it had little effect upon the way in which academics manage the transitions of new undergraduates through the first year of their degree. Going back further in time, some other student-centred contributions have appeared within academic journals: examples include John Bryson's (1997) 'Breaking through the A-level effect: a first-year tutorial in student self-reflection'; Haigh & Kilmartin's (1999) 'Student perceptions of the development of personal transferable skills'; and Maguire, Evans & Dyas's (2001) 'Approaches to learning: a study of first-year geography undergraduates'. However, such contributions are now at least a decade old, during which time the educational landscape has been substantially reshaped. It is, therefore, our overarching aim in this paper to breathe some new life into this corpus of student-focused research. In attempting to do this, we focus upon one specific facet of the transition to university for new geography students – namely the formal induction process experienced in the first days of their first term at university.

Formal induction programmes, a ubiquitous intervention by higher education institutions designed to help their new students to adjust to degree-level geography, are widely recognised as being a 'valuable instrument in the integration process' (Cock *et al.*, 2008, p.37). It is not our intention to challenge this consensus. Instead, we want to use the following pages to argue two things: firstly, that there is merit in extending the induction process (both temporally and in terms of scope and content) beyond what many institutions currently offer and, secondly, that induction programmes can be

improved markedly if they include the voices of existing students. In so doing, we aim to demonstrate the value of creating opportunities within current induction arrangements for existing undergraduate students to share with freshers (on the same course) their insights and experiences of making the transition to university.

To do this, we draw upon the new *Extended Induction to Geography* programme, which the School of GPS at Newcastle University piloted for the first time in September 2011. Although much of the context for the following discussion is inevitably institution-specific, the challenge of promoting student retention and encouraging students to make the transition to university successfully is by no means unique to this case study. Other geography degree programmes face similar transitional issues and we would therefore suggest that the basic concept of empowering existing students to have their voices heard has wider application, being easily moulded to suit the needs of many degree programmes.

Extended induction and the role of the student voice

As Hopkins (2006) observes, bringing the voice of existing students into the induction process for freshers is important because it enables more experienced students to contribute their unique understanding, experiences, perspective and knowledge to it (see also Pain, 2004). Reflecting further upon this, Sober (2011) outlines four key benefits for both the new and

existing students involved: firstly, student participation harnesses the knowledge of experienced learners and provides opportunities for them to disseminate this to new students; secondly, it makes self-reflection by existing students more applied and purposeful – and enhances their understanding of the process; thirdly, it facilitates a form of group mentoring between different course levels and student cohorts; and, finally, existing students can be empowered to produce guides and other induction literature which is more accessible to new students.

For many years the induction process for new geography students at Newcastle University followed a similar format. Lasting for one week, the first couple of days contained a series of timetabled plenary sessions led by the Head of Geography and the Degree Programme Director for Geography, along with contributions from the staff based in the university's library, careers service and sports centre. These sessions were followed later in induction week by pastoral tutor meetings, after which the formal induction process was rounded off by an induction 'party', held in one of the large university teaching spaces from 4-6 pm on the Friday afternoon. Student voices were not, however, completely absent. For example, members of the GeogSoc committee (usually third-year students) were allocated around 20 minutes during one of the plenary meetings to introduce themselves to the new students and to recruit new members.¹ These same students then sold

¹ GeogSoc is the student-run geography society at Newcastle University.

second-hand academic textbooks (previously purchased from graduating third years) at the induction party. Meanwhile, outside of the Geography induction process, the Newcastle University Students' Union always runs a lively schedule of induction activities for new students from any academic department.

In contrast to what had gone before, the *Extended Induction to Geography* pilot scheme, conducted at Newcastle University in 2011, was conceived as a series of formal and informal lectures, seminars, workshops, tutorials and mentor meetings which ran from freshers' week through to its culmination with a first-year residential fieldtrip to the Lake District in the fifth teaching week of term. Although many of the sessions covered similar content to the more traditional induction arrangements, by extending the timescale over which they were introduced to new students and by sequencing the order of topics that were covered on a need-to-know basis, the intention was to avoid students experiencing 'information overload' in the first few days of term. Many of these sessions were still ultimately staff-led, but extending the timeframe over which they were delivered allowed more of the induction information to be conveyed by participatory teaching methods with smaller groups of students. While this approach had many benefits (such as individualising the learning experience by allowing the staff to get to know individual students more quickly), following Hopkins' (2006) and Sober's (2011) lead, here we want to focus only upon one aspect of the *Extended*

Induction to Geography pilot scheme – namely the role of second- and third-year students acting as peer-mentors within the process.

Although we were slightly concerned at the start of the process, recruitment of student mentors was not a problem. Over 20 existing second- and third-year students initially expressed an interest when the peer mentoring role was first advertised within the department in May 2011.² Each was asked to provide the Degree Programme Director with a paragraph explaining why they wanted to take on this role. In theory, this process was designed to enable the staff to vet the applicants. In reality, it seemed to put off those students who were not fully committed and left us with 21 students, all of whom were dedicated to the mentoring role. The reasons given for volunteering as a mentor were sometimes altruistic, but mainly revolved around CV development and the acquisition of transferable skills. Many (but by no means all) applicants intended to apply to the Graduate Teacher Training Registry for PGCE programmes after graduation and saw the mentoring role as worthwhile additional experience that they could include in their personal statement. However, by the time mentoring began in September 2011, four students had dropped out due to study, employment and sport commitments. This left us with 17 mentors and provided a ratio of one mentor to nine mentees. All the mentors were volunteers and so the only

² The annual intake of geography students at Newcastle University is 150 per academic year.

cost to the department was for distinctive 'Geography Mentor' hoodies. The mentors were asked to wear these as much as possible during the extended induction period so that they were clearly identifiable to first-year geography students on and around the campus.

Once trained over two 2-hour long sessions in May 2011 and September 2011, the student mentors were used to enrich the geography department's teaching within a first-year core module entitled *Geographical Study Skills*. Delivered in 15 tutor groups of 10 students, this module is taught across the first year in the form of one-hour seminars, once a week.³ 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, by helping new first-year students to acquire the study skills and transferable skills needed to complete a geography degree successfully. Although a pre-existing module, it therefore leant itself to accepting some of the material previously delivered during the

³ Tutor groups are randomly created by the Degree Programme Director at the beginning of the first year and the students remain together as a group throughout the degree programme. Attaching mentors to tutor groups was pedagogically desirable; given that the *Geographical Study Skills* module is also taught in tutor groups, it was assumed that the students would quickly get to know each other and form a self-supporting group. In terms of managing the degree programme's logistics, it was also desirable to avoid creating dedicated mentor groups, comprising different sets of students.

induction week lectures. As part of the *Extended Induction to Geography* pilot scheme, we gave each mentor a clearly defined role, supporting one tutor group by leading the last 15 minutes of the first four *Geographical Study Skills* seminars.⁴ For this to work effectively, and avoid any awkwardness, the member of staff leading the first 45 minutes of these sessions was primed in advance to leave the room. Sometimes the mentors used their time with the group to reinforce the key message of the session; sometimes they empathised with the new undergraduates over how different learning at university was compared to learning at a school; sometimes they answered general questions that the group had been reticent to ask during the first part of the session. Here, the student mentors acted as a helping hand, a sounding board to listen to questions and concerns from the new students, while also offering reassurance. Their role enhanced learning across the module and supported Scanlon, Rowling & Weber's findings that 'it is only students who feel connected to the university who persist in their studies' (Scanlon, Rowling & Weber, 2007, p.226; also Bidgood, Saebi & May, 2006; Christie, Munro & Fisher, 2004; Brooks, 2002; Thomas, 2002; Smith & Naylor, 2001; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998). In some cases, the mentors and mentees also chatted at other times, via email, Facebook, Twitter and sometimes Skype. Importantly the mentor training set clear boundaries and emphasised that the mentors were not expected to act as unpaid staff members, taking on the responsibility from lecturers to teach students.

⁴ There were 15 tutor groups of 10 students but 17 mentors, meaning that two tutor groups were assigned two mentors.

Instead the emphasis was placed upon the unique contribution the mentors could offer to the induction process, as a friendly face available to answer questions or to point their mentees in the right direction for further advice. That said, with the exception of one member of staff, the extended induction did not generate any additional workload for paid academic staff. For one member of staff, designated as the mentor coordinator, there was an additional workload involved in recruiting and training mentors. There has been no resistance from the academic staff to the introduction of mentors and the fact that their introduction did not impinge upon staff time generally was a factor in this.

The fifth, and final, week of the extended induction period was a trip to the Lake District for all new first-year students. Ideally, we would have taken all the peer mentors with us on this trip; however, mentor availability, the number of beds in the youth hostel and the cost involved all prevented this. Instead, we asked for volunteers and opted to take six mentors. It was a three-day residential trip and the work the students completed formed part of the first assessment for the *Geographical Study Skills* module. The staff directed the daytime academic activities and ran the early evening project briefing and debriefing sessions. The mentors were given a roving brief – informally mixing, helping and chatting with the first years at every opportunity. The mentors also ran a series of team-building games, quizzes and other activities later in the evenings, designed to help the students to get to know other people on

their course. The youth hostel's bar was opened during these activities from 8.30-10.30 pm each evening.

In addition, as part of this new extended induction programme, the student mentors also developed *The A-Z Survival Guide for Geography Students* as another means for existing students to pass practical advice, hints and tips about making the transition to university onto the new intake of geography undergraduates (Richardson & Tate, 2012). The creation of the guide was student-led, with the emphasis being to encourage the student mentors to reflect upon all aspects of their geography degree and to produce a document for the next generation of first years. A copy was given to each new undergrad by their mentor in the first week of term in the hope that this written expression of the student voice would 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. In the future there will also be an interactive version of the A-Z guide accessible via Blackboard (Newcastle University's VLE). It is hoped that the combination of the handbook and regular meetings will embed student representation and the student voice at the heart of the induction process.

The benefits of extended induction for new and existing undergraduate students

The extended induction period for new geography undergraduates responded to the thematic priorities established in 2011 by the Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES) subject area of the Higher Education Academy. Firstly, it promoted *active learning* and improved *learning, teaching and assessment*. The most popular academic-related questions the mentors were asked by the new students included: do I really have to do the reading after each lecture? My first assessment is due to be handed in during the fourth teaching week, how far in advance should I start it? How many sources do I really need in the bibliography of my first assessment? How do I reserve books in the university library? Have I referenced correctly in my bibliography? How strict is the hand-in date and time? What happens if I fail? Of course, all of these are questions that the academic staff could have answered, but it is more doubtful whether, in the first instance, new students would have felt sufficiently empowered to ask staff members these questions. Later, when we marked the first assessment, the breadth of reading and the quality of referencing were better than in previous years and there was a small increase in the average mark for the assessment attained by the cohort. Although the causality is uncertain, the role the mentors played cannot be overlooked as one possible explanation.

The idea to roll out *The A-Z Geography Student Handbook* as part of the extended induction programme also improved the existing students' *employability, scholarship and professional development*. Encouraging students to reflect and critically engage with their own skill-set is important

(Haigh & Kilmartin, 1999) and holding the position of unpaid student mentor offered opportunities for the development of transferable skills and CV enhancement. Extended induction therefore worked for both staff and students – while enhancing the learning experience and easing the transition to higher education for new students, it also enhanced the graduate skills and employability of the current students.

Finally, the new extended induction programme also contributed to the GEES priority of improving *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). Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld (2005), who emphasise the need for students to make social connections as early as possible within their degree, believe that students without support 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. In the light of this, it is apposite to 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? Is it perhaps a less daunting alternative for new undergraduates to admit self-

doubts to their peers? If so, having the voice of existing students heard loudly enhances any induction process.

Concluding thoughts

From the academic year 2012-13 all British universities will have to publish more details about student satisfaction – through the provision of a Key Information Set (KIS) and an enhanced National Student Survey (NSS). Despite these requirements, 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 A-Z guide can provide. Schutz (1964, p.94) explains the latter's importance in terms of providing 'contextually tested knowledge', 'trustworthy recipes' and 'routine procedures', all of which 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 existing undergraduates within the induction process.

Evaluation of the effectiveness of our extended induction pilot has now taken place, and increased retention rates across the degree programme, plus an increase in GeogSoc membership amongst first-year students, suggest that there is a stronger 'geographical community' in existence within the department. This sentiment also finds numerical support. When asked as part

of an induction questionnaire to 'assess the impact of student mentors on your induction experience', first-year students rated the quality of the student mentoring they had received at 4.2 out of 5. The first-year extended induction programme generally also scored notably higher satisfaction ratings than our current second- and third-year induction arrangements.

These relatively modest achievements represent a good start for a new initiative and have convinced us that it is worth pursuing the pilot in future years. However, having also reflected on this process ourselves, we will revisit whether 15 minutes at the end of *Geographical Study Skills* is an appropriate juncture for mentoring to take place and will make amendments in relation to the feedback we received. For example, sometimes the sessions lasted a lot longer than 15 minutes – especially in the case of the mentor-led library and student union tours in teaching weeks 2 and 3 (which were valuable late additions to the mentors' role, but clearly were not feasible within 15 minutes). 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 is less problematic, as it allows students to tailor the learning experience to their individual transitional needs. Those that opted out of mentor engagement at an early stage were from the most self-sufficient group of students. The predominant reason given for their partial engagement with the programme was that it just did not suit their needs, rather than it being inadequate provision.

With rising tuition fees, university recruitment faces uncertain times and it is clearly possible to market initiatives like extending the induction period as providing more 'value for money', 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 are vital. Indeed our experiences suggest that extending induction can increase the engagement of both 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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