



SUPPORTING STUDENT TRANSITION TO HE IN A COVID CONTEXT

This resource has been compiled using the input from a national Shreshop, held in May 2021, with a focus on problematising, sharing and suggesting solutions for HE providers preparing to welcome new students in 2021/22

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Background

The pandemic forced a swift move to online learning in March 2020 which for many was the first experience of teaching and/or learning in the virtual environment. The sector news focussed in the educational aspect of the move in that initial phase reporting on concerns of quality, parity and applauding the pace of change with the digital skills agenda. The announcement of further lockdowns meant the initial, emergency, move now needed to be re-shaped into a more considered response that would potentially lead to sustained change across the sector.

Introduction

As part of the re-shaping of the emergency response to the move online, the University of Cumbria and Jisc, working with Advance HE brought together interested parties across the sector to discuss student support, specifically addressing the question 'How can we support the transition into HE in the 2021/22 academic cycle?'. While the focus was on new entrants it became apparent that many of the challenges and potential solutions would apply to returning learners. Around 50 colleagues attended the event, badged as a Sharesop, from 30 providers across the UK. Attendees had from a wide range of roles from tutors, skills support, well-being, managers, research students and as such the viewpoints and solutions provide a rich resource.

This document is designed to provide HE colleagues with a starting point for planning for the most effective and efficient ways to support learners starting in UK HE in 2021/22. There are three parts to the resource: the current plans of the institutions represented for how they might support learners to transition into HE in 2021/22; the known unknowns within the challenge of supporting the transition and some potential ideas to address those known unknowns.

The information within this document was co-created with participants and every effort has been made to anonymise institutions. A list of the institution represented is listed in the appendix.

Plans to Support the Transition for the 2021 Intake

During the session we asked delegates to contribute to a Padlet on supporting transition for September 2021. We asked people to add posts based on these areas for both returning students and new students.

1. Supporting the Academic transition
2. Supporting the Digital skills needed to access the course and related services
3. Supporting them to socialise and feel part of the community
4. Supporting their well-being
5. What else is a known concern/factor you are planning to support? How?

An analysis of the Padlet was undertaken, tagging content so identify themes emerging from the discussion.

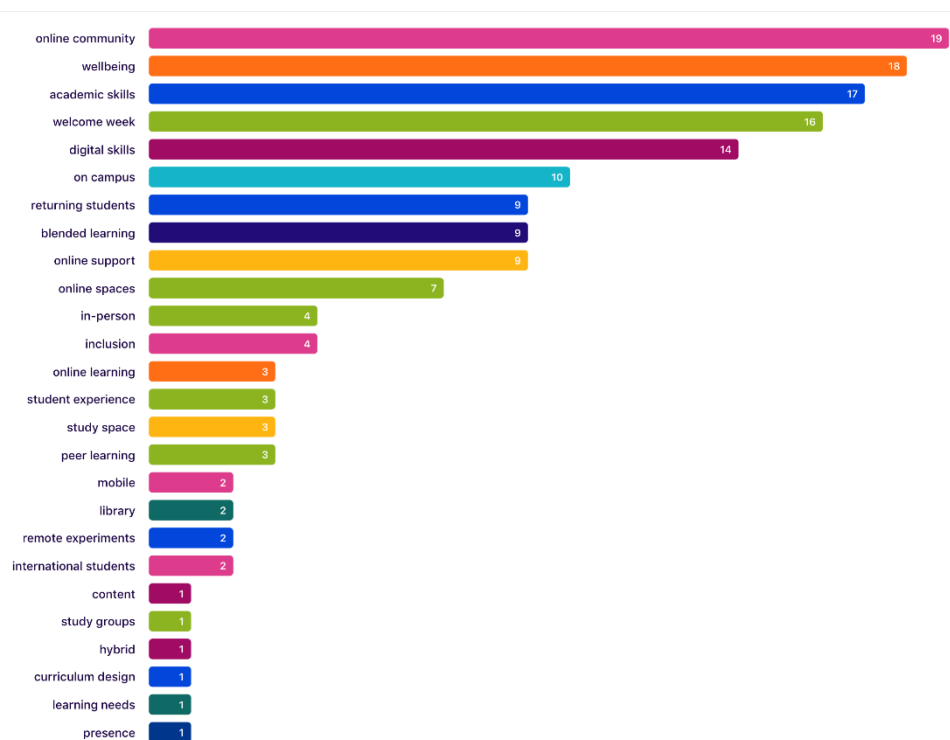


Chart 1: Emerging Themes from Current Plans to Support the Transition to HE in 2021/22

Overarching themes

The main themes were:

- Building online communities
- The importance of student (and staff) wellbeing
- Supporting and developing academic skills
- Developing inductions and planning welcome weeks
- Building digital skills
- Returning to on campus delivery

Building online communities

One of the key themes that came out of the discussion was the value and importance of building online communities. As one delegate pointed out in their planning, they felt it was important in *'supporting them to socialise and feel part of the community'*.

One university was *'adjusting programme and module content to ensure students have more time at the beginning of term to engage in social and community building activities'*.

Another comment stressed the importance of these online communities being safe spaces for students. To address this their plan was to *'create safe [virtual] spaces for them to start to develop social communities which will be picked up when they return to campus and helped to develop further'*.

One university wanted to *'increase connectedness and a sense of belonging to the university community'*.

The importance of student (and staff) wellbeing

Another theme that was drawn out was the importance of student (and staff) wellbeing. The discussion recognised the current landscape as having a negative impact on student wellbeing and at the same time that *'we do not yet fully understand the social and emotional impact of the UK lockdowns on school-leavers or mature learners'*.

The importance of reducing anxiety was mentioned by a few, as they were planning to *'include a section on What will my Course Look Like in September. This would provide clarity on what is virtual / physical at course level and reduce anxiety'*.

The development of holistic support packages was mentioned: *'We wrote online courses last year to support students they are not only focused on online, but cover well-being, meeting people, academic skills'*. The importance of signposting support was also mentioned, as one posting said, *'we are going to highlight the well-being services available to the students'*.

There was also a recognition that we had lived through a challenging time and more students than normal will have faced bereavement.

Supporting and developing academic skills

With the disruption to both new students and returning students, many comments were made about supporting and developing academic skills.

As one post said: *'We have a suite of Academic Skills transitions resources which we make available to all new students'*. Others commented that *'We're creating a study skills audit for students. They will be able to assess their study skills and then will be given the links for where to find support'* and *'We anticipate that new and returners may be dealing with lack of confidence/self-belief and self-regulation in their academic skills'*.

Developing inductions and planning welcome weeks

Many people talked about their Welcome Weeks and inductions for students: *'Introducing an extended 2 week induction programme with core and optional value add activities'*. The length of the Welcome Week or induction varied with one institution planning a six week Welcome Programme:

'We have an established extended pre welcome programme, which is 6 weeks long and has asynchronous and synchronous content every week for the students to work through to help with transitioning to HE'.

Another institution was *'having an extended two week settle back in transition programme to ease students back into their studies on campus'* for their returning students, another institution had a similar idea, *'as well as creating space in the timetable for 2nd years to have an induction like a 1st year'*.

Building digital skills

As with academic skills (but slightly less commentary) the disruption to both new students and returning students, many comments were made about supporting and developing the digital skills of students. There was a recognition that many students did not have the (academic) digital skills to successfully engage with online and blended learning. As one participant said there was a need to be *'supporting the digital skills needed to access the course and related services'*. Another said *'we overestimated the students ability to use and engage with online content'* and it was commented that more is need in *'supporting the Digital skills needed to access the course and related services'*. One institution felt the need so they *'updated our digital skills support'*.

Returning to on campus delivery

Many institutions commented on the desire to get students back onto campus: *'management is very keen to offer students a campus experience'* and some participants felt there was a *'strong drive to bring them back to campus'*.

As well as new entrants and for returning students the importance of on-campus inductions was being thought about: *'Need to reiterate student inductions for the library, particularly the physical space, as many students will not have used physical library/academic support services'*. Apart from libraries, there, there were many comments about labs.

The Known Unknowns in Supporting the 2021 Intake



Chart 2: Wordle representing the Know Unknown for supporting the transition to HE in 2021/22

Main themes emerging from the Known Unknowns

This section provides the most common questions that the institutions represented understood as being key to designing and implementing effective support for those transitioning into the new academic cycle:

| Known Unknown | | Consequent considerations for providers |
|--|---|---|
| Will there be gaps in subject knowledge, gaps in skills, gaps in experience for incoming students? | > | How will we identify these gaps in a supportive manner? |
| How are students feeling about starting university / coming back on campus? What is worrying them the most, and what are they most looking forward to? | > | How can we create a supportive, positive environment in which students can share these feelings so we can offer them the support they need? |
| Has the media portrayal of higher education / universities impacted how the students feel? | > | To what extent do we feel the need to acknowledge the media concerns with students? |
| What are student expectations around delivery modes? What is their perception of online learning? | > | Particularly, considering new students coming from school and mature students coming from home lockdown, how do perceptions differ among student groups and how do we organise support to meet these differing needs? |
| Will students have the resources they need – technology, environment, and skills – to engage fully with online learning? | > | How do we ensure parity of connectivity? |
| What are student expectations of the whole student experience? How do they want to access services, and what will work best? | > | Which mechanisms can we use to work with students to understand their needs and priorities? |
| What will the rules be for incoming international students, and will they want to come? | > | How can we reassure and support international students? |
| What additional or different responsibilities or pressures do students have in their home lives? | > | How can we create a supportive, positive environment in which students can share these pressures so we can offer them the support they need? |
| What are staff expectations and how prepared are they? | > | How can we ensure student services and tutors work in partnership to support cohorts and individuals? |

Potential Solutions to the Known Unknowns

Small groups worked together to discuss solutions based on the type of delivery their institution were currently planning for in the 2021/22 academic cycle: fully face-to-face, fully online or blended. The largest category was 'blended' and there were equal numbers between the other two categories. In this instance, 'blended' was outlined as neither fully face-to-face nor full online.

Discussion recognised that there were a number of positive changes afforded by a pandemic and that for some students the online environment mean better accessibility and greater opportunities for learning. Many institutions commented on the acceleration of upskilling tutors and students with digital skills and the positive mindset of including learning technologies as part of a pedagogic response to the pandemic as opposed to a practical response to the pandemic.

The key here is to recognise, celebrate and harness this positive experience to further build on a learning, teaching and student support for the transition. How has your institution shared the positive outcomes and the potential for making sustainable changes to learning, teaching and student support?

A useful phrase used in this part of the Sharesop was 'the multiple layered disadvantage' of the online environment for staff and students. Some shared the extent to which they were surprised of the extent of challenges related to digital connectivity and the number of students learning using only their phones. When this is coupled with some staff still feeling anxious about designing learning online this was seen as an area for focus. In particular, there was discussion about the politics of ensuring clarity of information given to staff and students about what the coming year will look like and what the expectations of staff, students and the IT requirements will be that will enable those expectations. One university has set up clear expectations for the online elements of their teaching and learning organised by type of learning activity (lecture, seminar, workshop) which included what platforms should be used, whether it should be asynchronous or synchronous and parameters that must be adhered to. This is then used by student support teams to ensure this is mirrored in their work as closely as possible.

How can we support colleagues to work with uncertainty? How in the organisation can provide this support for staff and students? To what extent are expectations of teaching, learning and student support clear to staff and students? Where is this information found and whose responsibility is it to discuss it with students?

One group focussed on skills or learning lost as result of the pandemic and its impact on schools, colleges and on-the-job training for apprenticeships. A solution put forward was a skills audit with caveats of it being carried out sensitively and anonymously with outcomes shared with tutors and support staff to sessions can be tailored to the presented needs. The group felt that with some skills

were vital to engage with the course from the outset, such as maths required for Science-based courses, or software knowledge for Creative or Design subjects. There was mention of research done at Oxford into lost skills which was fed back into OfS that essentially said all learning loss was different for every student. There was some discussion around students from widening participation backgrounds, and also the access to, and quality of IT equipment, which might render the whole auditing of skills moot: *'some of our students didn't know how to scroll down a page'* was one comment.

How can we make skills audits a positive experience for students? How will the information be shared to ensure support is put in place in terms of tailoring teaching and supporting additional needs? In what subjects is it more appropriate for any skills audit to be course-based rather than university-based? What is the most appropriate timing for the audit?

Other solutions or points to be mindful of to mitigate the known unknowns are listed below:

Make learning and support easy for students to engage with

- The need for consistency across the VLE presence for modules so students feel comfortable navigating the VLE and know where materials are.
- Putting previous material that was in a word doc on something like a Moodle book or page so materials are more responsive (not always effective for larger presentations though)
- Offer additional drop in sessions on campus or online, using breakout groups themed by concern if appropriate

Supporting students to be responsible for their learning

- Students need to consolidate knowledge in relation to the learning objectives via formative assessments regularly so they can check their progress
- Consider different mechanisms to build confidence in the learning process through relationship building, gap-exercises, peer teaching/learning

Nurturing Engagement with the University Community

- Apps to support online social engagement, such as Together, [Fika](#) and [Wonderme](#)
- Consider class sizes and use of physical space. How can these be adapted for more effective communication and engagement. One institution said class sizes less than 50 will probably be in person, larger sizes will probably be online.

Appendix A: List of Participating Organisations

Arts University Bournemouth
Bath Spa University
Birkbeck University of London
City University, London
Glasgow Caledonian University
Goldsmiths University of London
Harper Adams University
Imperial College London
Kings College London
Kingston University of London
Middlesex University
Oxford Brookes University
Queen Mary University of London
Queen's University Belfast
Roehampton University
University College London
University of Bradford
University of Cambridge
University of East Anglia
University of Edinburgh
University of Hertfordshire
University of Lincoln
University of Liverpool
University of Reading
University of Sheffield
University of Sussex
University of the West of England (UWE)
University of Warwick
University of West London
University of York
University of Worcester

Appendix B: Resource Pack for Working on Known Unknowns: Key Questions to Consider

“Getting to the starting line” – prior learning / prior experiences

- What learning was lost?
- What skills have the students missed?
- What life skills/experiences have incoming students missed out on?
- What was the student learning experience last year?
- What knowledge are students missing? What is their existing level of knowledge?
- What particular study skills will they need more support on?
- What sort of learning did students take part in over the last 2 years?
- What was the students’ last experience of exams?
- To what extent was there a loss of opportunities to gain independence (domestic and academic)?
- How much of an *additional* gap has the last year created?
- Did they miss out on the transition out of school - are they in a 'university' mind set?
- For international students, what has been the impact on their level of English (and subsequent learning)?
- What has been the variation in home / school provision between students?
- What is the outcome of teacher assessed grades going to be?
- Are we going to over or under recruit?
- How best to transition the learners?

Covid-specific considerations

- How long will 1m physical distancing be in place? / What will the social distancing requirements be?
- How many students will have been vaccinated?
- What provision will need to be made for staff and students still needing to shield?
- How forgiving will students be if we are placed into yet another lockdown in the future? We have done well so far on goodwill, but will that last?
- Will freshers week be a super spreader event?
- Are students equipped to pivot quickly between face to face and online and hybrid if they need to self isolate?

How students are feeling & Mental health and wellbeing

In general

- What are the levels of anxiety like amongst students?
- How do they feel about coming back?
- What will be the demand on mental health services?
- Will all students want to be back on site?
- What are the students worried about?
- What are the students looking forward to?
- Do students feel they've made the right choice of university, without being able to visit?
- Are they excited about starting?
- How resilient will students be? Both academically and socially.
- What are you really excited about?
- What do you want to be able to do at university that you haven't been able to do during your VI Form?
- Confidence, socialization and what does it mean to be a student now?

- Press coverage of university provision has been negative on the whole - will students be coming expecting it to be awful? Does this matter?
- How far should we address the negative press around universities in order to reassure students, or does that just reinforce it?
- What are they willing to come on-campus for?

On learning

- How do students feel about going back to face to face learning?
- What is the students' choice of delivery mode?
- How are students feeling in terms of next stage of their studies and their motivation to study?
- What expectations of the new normal learning experience?
- Will new intake be more or less likely to actively participate online. how many will prefer online?
- Do students find online/blended learning good value for money? Are they satisfied with this or prefer this beyond the pandemic?

Responding to online learning and assessment

- Will students keep journals/records/reflections of their learning if they are looking at screens for much of their time
- How they will transition into a much stricter assessment regime. The current 'emergency' regulations are very very flexible, but this might not be sustainable

Student expectations and student experience

- What actually are student expectations?

Learning provision

- Do students expect to be able to choose between online and on campus learning?
- What do the students expect from online/hybrid learning? and how does that match with what we have been delivering?
- Are students expecting high levels of flexible delivery? can our technology/staff support dual learning experiences?

Student experience / support services

- What are the student's expectations of support services in terms of access for the next academic year?

Will returning students expect a continuation of remote services provided during the pandemic as teaching returns to face to face?

- What is the priority for students in terms of student experience?
- How much will they engage with what we offer? How might this fluctuate?

Technology

- How confident do they feel in using the technology being used to teach?
- Whether students will be familiar with Zoom etc - we know schools tend towards Teams and Google classroom but we don't use this for online delivery - how much training do we need to give them on other platforms?
- What will MS Teams/Zoom will look like at start of A/Y?
- If students have to learn remotely, not only what tech do they have, but do they have any space to work?

Mode of delivery

- How will we be delivering?
- Will there be teaching with some people in the room and some online?

Estates

- Do we have the right rooms to meet the numbers wanting to be on campus, that can also be available online for those that don't want to be on campus?

International students

- Will international students be able to return to start in person teaching in the autumn term? what provision will they need if they are unable to return in person?
- How many students will come next year (international students)?
- Are international students going to be in the UK for start of term?
- How do we manage the numbers of students who will need to quarantine as traveling from red zone?

Wider context

- What are their caring responsibilities?
- What will mature learners need - those who haven't done much online at all but been homeschooling and caring?
- What financial issues are students facing?
- Will large numbers of our students PLAN to study online so they can do full time jobs and carer roles?
- Are we going to have more UK students staying at home and commuting?

Staff

- Will academics want to be onsite now?
- Will colleagues get out of 'emergency pivot' mode and realise that we need to design for online - since overseas students might not be able to come to UK
- What will it be like teaching socially distanced seminars?
- What are the lecturer expectations of a cohort that will have missed out.

Appendix C: Resources in the Public Domain shared by HE Providers

Canterbury Christchurch made use of Padlets for specific cohorts which provided an online suite of resources presented as a timeline. Students can access these in their own time and pace and revisit them throughout the year. Topics cover a range of things from preparing for HE study to accommodation and support:

- Making a successful start to your university experience
<https://cccu.padlet.org/transitions/mt48l93jypws1cq1>
- Moving from Level 4 to Level 5
<https://cccu.padlet.org/transitions/bxlxywo6f12ihfej>
- Moving from Level 5 to Level 6
<https://cccu.padlet.org/transitions/2lsgknh21zqtcfn6>
- Making a successful start to postgraduate study
<https://cccu.padlet.org/transitions/69xygn6v8nhvfz45>

Used by **Nottingham Trent**: Pre arrival Phone Calls which focussed on all UK students starting their undergraduate degree with a focus on contacting those in under-represented groups. The aims of the call campaign were to:

- welcome new students to NTU,
- signpost them to tasks that they needed to complete pre-entry (online enrolment, pre-reading, accommodation, finance etc.)
- to promote targeted and relevant engagement opportunities within NTU

Used by **York**: Step Ahead. Online Induction event for underrepresented groups aimed primarily at introducing new students to each other so they could make friends prior to the start of term. There was ample opportunity for social interaction, facilitated by our Student Helpers. Participants also engaged in workshops focused on giving our students the best start to their new journey.