Work Package 2:

Research and Contextualisation

Partner Research Report

United Kingdom

Updated October 2012

Lost in Transition Europe (LiTE)

Declaration

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication (communication) reflects the views of the author(s) and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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1. Background and introduction

1.1 The report aims to:

a) understand current national strategies which support the transition from non-compulsory or mature learners to Higher Education and build on, or develop new, strategies and resources;

b) identify existing models, structures, strategies and pedagogies in the partner country along with good practice, strengths and weaknesses.

c) provide information for the comparative study and then to develop supportive strategies and resources for both the transition of these groups to HE and completion of their first year of HE study.

1.2 Introducing the theme

Transition into Higher Education is a challenge for both the sector that comes before, the despatching sector, and the university sector itself, as the receiving sector. This is as true in the STEM arena as it is in other disciplines and curriculum areas. Much work has been done to tackle the issue of transition and the relating one of a successful First Year Experience leading to improved retention and ultimately better outcomes for students.

There is considerable evidence in the literature about strategies employed by universities in the context of the First Year Experience that enhance transition into higher education and retention in higher education. This is in the context of the vast literature that identifies factors that lead to non-progression and non-completion, taking on board guidance from a vast body of evidence. Whilst we do not claim to have conducted anything like approaching a systematic literature review, we wanted nonetheless to contextualise the framework in the key literature.

In terms of higher education the role of transition into and through the first year are crucial for increasing access and for improving retention and success.

The project aims to understand current national strategies which support the transition from non-compulsory or mature learners to Higher Education and build on, or develop new, strategies and resources.

This report, therefore, provides an analysis of available background information on existing transition to HE strategies in England, as the largest education system in the UK, along with information about resources for non-compulsory or mature learners and other underrepresented groups. This includes the provision of information, advice and guidance and academic/study skills support from pre-entry through to the first year. The report will also include details of the impact and success of each of these strategies and resources, and the identification of potential gaps or inadequate and/or unsuccessful provision.

The issue of student retention is important for a variety of reasons. As Yorke and Longden (2004, p. 4) observe all governments invest in higher education to some degree or another and they thus expect to see some return from their investment. Therefore, it is important on a national level for those students who are admitted to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to stay the course and succeed in their subsequent chosen careers. Indeed, the emphasis on the benefits of student retention detailed in the National Audit Office (NAO) (2007, p.5) report are centred on the fiscal advantages to the stakeholders involved (student/graduate, HEI, economy). And although it does acknowledge that some students who do not complete their tertiary studies may benefit in some way from the experience the emphasis on the definition of 'success' is associated with course completion, degree acquisition and progression to a well-paid career.

2. Theoretical guidelines

Education is compulsory in England up until the age of 16, rising to 17 from 2013 and 18 from 2015. This does not mean young people need to remain in schools. Rather, they can chose from three options:

- Full time education, such as school, college or home education
- Apprenticeship
- Part time education or training if they are employed, self-employed or volunteering full-time (defined as 20 hours or more a week)

The English education system has been undergoing significant change since the current coalition government took office in May 2010. The government has implemented a range of policies designed to diversify the educational sector, with the objective of improvingeducational standards. A key policy was started by the previous Labour government and relates to structural changes in the schools sector that are designed to create greater diversity of types of schools, including Academies, Free Schools, Studio Schools and University Technical Colleges. This development is highly relevant as the impact of a more diverse school system is considerable in terms of the curriculum taught and thus, potentially, on progression rates and successful transition to Higher Education. As a result of these changes, there will now not only be public (state-funded) and private (independent) schools, but within the state funded sector a much greater diversity of *quasi*-independent institutions.

In terms of learning stages, the English education system is organised in a series of Key Stages (see Table 1 below) which were introduced by the Education Reform Act (1988).

Table 1 *Key stages in the English National Curriculum*

Age	Stage	Statutory requirements	Phase
3 -5	Early years	Local Authorities obliged to provide early years education free of charge	Early years
5 -7	Key stage 1	Agreed educational outcomes to be reached at the end of the Key Stage (and tested via national curriculum tests)	Primary
7 -11	Key stage 2	Agreed educational outcomes to be reached at the end of the Key Stage (and tested via national curriculum tests)	
11-14	Key Stage 3	Agreed educational outcomes to be reached at the end of the Key Stage	Secondary
14-16	Key Stage 4	Agreed educational outcomes to be reached at the end of the Key Stage (and tested via GCSE)	Secondary (end of compulsory schooling[1]) General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE)
16-19	Key Stage 5 (sixth form if in school; or further education college)	Pupils generally choose 4 subjects in the first year of this key stage, often dropping to 3 subjects in which they are examined.	General Certificate of Education (A-level) as entry certificate for Higher Education

The 1988 Education Reform Act introduced a National Curriculum in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (Scotland has its own 'Curriculum for Excellence'). Its statutory nature applied to all state-funded schools, ensuring that all children in local authority-controlled schools (i.e. state schools) were taught a prescribed number of subjects. Independent schools, which educate around 7% of school-age children in the UK, were exempted from the statutory duties of the National curriculum. The National Curriculum applied to primary and secondary schools alike, but the quasi-independent

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[1] The government has committed to raising the participation age, i.e. the age of compulsory schooling, to 18 from 2015.

schools that have been created subsequently, such as academies and free schools, can also be exempted.

Table 2 indicates the subjects which represent the statutory elements of the National Curriculum, as updated by the Education Act (2002).

Table 2 *National curriculum subjects in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*

Subject	Key Stage 1(5-7)	Key Stage 2 (7-11)	Key stage 3 (11-14)	Key Stage 4 (14-16)
English	P	P	P	P
Mathematics	P	P	P	P
Science	P	P	P	P
Art and Design	P	P	P	
Citizenship			P	P
Design and Technology	P	P	P	
Geography	P	P	P	
History	P	P	P	
Information and Communication Technology (ICT)	P	P	P	P
Modern Foreign Languages		P (from 2013)	P	
Music	P	P	P	
Physical Education	P	P	P	P
Work-related learning				P

Welsh is also part of the National Curriculum in Wales. In addition, provision is made in all maintained schools to meet the statutory requirement to offer a course in Religious Education under the Education Act (1996). Parents have the right to withdraw pupils from this if they wish.

There is an ongoing review of the National Curriculum with specific suggestions for changes in both the primary and secondary phases. The primary stage of the review has just been reported and recommendations are currently implemented.

Since the introduction of greater flexibility for schools, and particularly of new forms of schools in England, the pace and scale of which has increased dramatically since 2012, much greater diversity of curricula can be observed. Academies, for example, have been given the freedom to adapt a range of areas of school operations, from the terms and conditions under which staff are appointed to the nature and organisation of the curriculum taught.

There are voices in England currently concerned that, when it comes to transition to Higher Education, this much more diverse system could potentially reverse the advances made in widening participation in Higher Education in recent years. Without oversimplifying this complex argument, it is worth highlighting the fact that schools are measured through publically available performance tables. These effectively collate information on examination pass rates, as well as value-added data and other information. Consequently, schools are often driven to making choices in their curriculum design that ensures they do as well as they can in these tables.

The screen shot below shows how, comparative data on school achievement is available on theDepartment for Education's website. The information is designed to enable parents to exercise maximum choice when it comes to selecting a school for their children

Figure 1 *Screenschot of English performance tables (DfE website)*

Critics of the system claim that the pressure on schools to improve, or at least maintain, their position in these performance tables, commonlyreferred to as league tables, has resulted in some schools narrowing theircurriculum offer to increase pass rates in examinations, for example by

encouraging students to take more 'vocational' subjects. As part of its shift in emphasis towards more 'traditional' academic subjects, the coalition government has taken steps to make it more difficult for schools to do this. In contrast, universities tend to value subjects which assure them young people have acquired the necessary skills and competence to master transition to Higher Education effectively and study successfully at university.

Finally, changes to the system for funding higher education study in England made by the coalition government mean that from September 2012 universities can charge students tuition fees of up to £9,000 a year for full time courses. A tuition fee loan is available to cover the full cost of these fees,which students are not required to repay until they are in employment. Welsh students have access to a grant and loan to cover the fees. Tuition fees are charged by Scottish universities to all students except those already resident in Scotland who are exempt. As a result, the English university system has been identified as the most expensive public university system in the world and the effect on access and transition to higher education of raising tuition fees so dramatically is being closely monitored.

3. Examples

This section outlines some examples of effective practice in higher education institutions in the UK, with most being drawn from English universities.

3.1 National/institutional policies and practices

National Aspiration raising programme (AimHigher)

The Aimhigher programme was a government-funded initiative that aimed to increase participation in Higher Education. Between 2004 and 2008 500 Million Pounds had been invested in the programme, with the funding being reduced to £75 Million in the final year of the programme. Activities varied amongst the regional Aimhigher partnerships, but all focused on summer school activities, outreach seminars, taster courses, student mentoring and campus visits. The programme was cancelled in 2011 as part of the coalition government's budget cuts, justified by the assertion that Aimhigher had not been effective enough in ensuring greater participation from underrepresented groups of students. However, this has been contested since the end of the programme, with statistics from the University Council's Admissions Service (UCAS) indicating steadily rising applications from Aimhigher targeted students.

Figure 2 *University application rates from deprived areas of England 2004-2009*
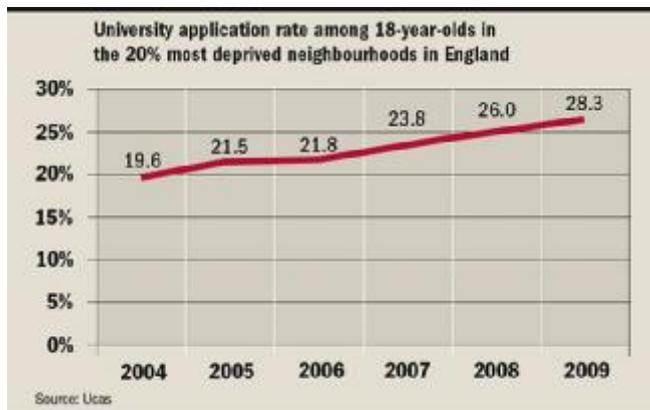
Institution-based good practice (Aston University undergraduate mentoring programme)

Aston University implemented a comprehensive peer mentoring system, entitled Support for students by students. In contrast to many other similar schemes, the Aston peer mentoring programme is differentiated to match the different stages of the student life cycle. It therefore starts with a pre-entry peer mentoring programme that is aimed to address issues of transition. The aim of the pre-entry programme is to pre-empt any issues associated with transition that could lead to non-progression. This programme includes an element of e-mentoring in order to provide support to transition students before they set foot on campus for the first time.

The peer mentoring programme comprises the following stages:

- Pre-entry peer mentoring
- Transition mentoring
- Placement mentoring and E-mentoring
- Graduate E- mentoring
- Postgraduate mentoring.

The scheme highlights the benefits of peer mentoring to both mentors and mentees. These are also acknowledged in an annual celebration event dedicated to peer mentoring.

Figure 3 *Peer mentoring: pathways to success*
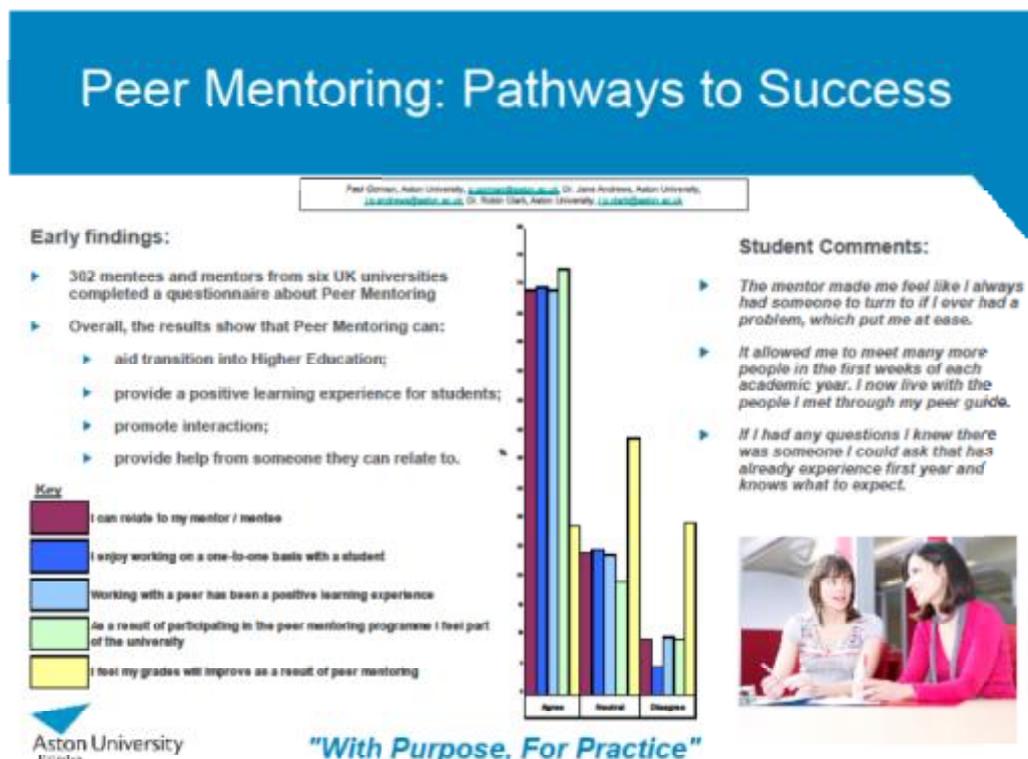
3.2 Individual examples of underrepresented groups

Example 1: Mature student accessing Higher Education

Age at HE entry: 38 / Gender: Female

Background information [EDITED]

I attended high school in a working class, traditional mining area in Staffordshire during the early 1980s. There was no expectation for ordinary pupils (especially girls) to do anything other than leave school and go to work. Indeed, out of my entire year group I only know of three students that entered HE upon completion of their A levels and one of those did not complete the course.So, I did what was expected of me and I left school at sixteen with a handful of GCE O levels and CSEs. Finding work however proved to be somewhat problematic.

I did undertake a BTEC course in Business and Finance in my early twenties as a career development opportunity provided by my employer.The only other training that I received were a variety of in-house professional development courses which I had to complete whilst employed as a police officer.

Subjects studied (HE)

- BA (hons) Creative and Professional Writing combined with Film Studies (Joint Award) – 1:1
- Postgraduate Certificate and Diploma in Education
- MA Education (Learning and Teaching) – not yet completed

Motivations for studying the subject/course

I had been employed as a police officer for eleven years and had been quite badly injured whilst on duty. I was left unfit for duty and as a result the force decided to pension me out. I wasn't quite ready to retire at 38 so I needed a new direction for my life to follow. I wanted to prove that a working class girl from Staffordshire could get a degree despite the low expectations that had been foisted upon her during her compulsory education.

My reason for undertaking my postgraduate study was based more on professional considerations. During my undergraduate studies I had studied a module called Teaching and Tutoring Writing which I had thoroughly enjoyed and felt that would provide me with a new career option.

Whilst still a graduand I received an email from the university that I had studied at asking me whether I would be interested in providing some tutorial support (paid work) for students who were struggling to cope with academic writing. I jumped at the chance and my role eventually developed into providing all aspect of academic skills support to students at various stages in their academic careers. As a result, it made sense to become a qualified teacher.

Reasons for success

Quite simply, I loved every minute of it. I felt privileged to have been given the opportunity to go to university and I wanted to make the most of the experience. In addition, I met a tutor who very quickly became my total mentor and her support, advice, encouragement (and now friendship) is still invaluable to me today.

Views on current system (at time of entry) and support for transition

You were very much left to your own devices to organise yourself and your time. However, I think being an extra-mature student helped me with this because I knew that it was up to me to get the job done and take responsibility for my learning experience.

However, as I have previously stated I was lucky to be allocated a Personal Tutor who was second to none. I had done incredibly well in my first year at university and was in line to achieve a First Class honours degree based on those results. But then I hit the second year glitch (an area that in my opinion is under-researched in terms of retention and progression) I lost confidence in my abilities as a student and my grades began to suffer. Even though they were still well above average I didn't feel that I was performing as well as I could. My Personal Tutor got me through this and showed me that if I relaxed the results would come.

Example 2: School leaver post A level

Age at HE entry: 19 / Gender: Male

This student achieved 12 GCSEs at age 16. He then took AS examinations in German, Mathematics, Biology and English, progressing to A2 exams in English and German and the Extended Project Qualification.

My school was quite traditional, some would say old-fashioned. Expectations were always high. Looking back it was probably quite a good thing that teachers had those expectations. I don't think I worked as had as I could have at school. I always thought I was going to go to university after school and both my parents had been to university. I wasn't sure what subjects to choose for university. My mum and I went to a number of open days. In the end I chose English at university because I always quite liked it and because it wouldn't close any doors. I spoke to friends of my parents as well as my friends and teachers and, because I didn't really know what I wanted to do professionally, English at university seemed a good idea.

3.3 Strategies for attracting underrepresented groups to HE

Making learning relevant, University of Bedfordshire

Business Pods have been central to the redesign of the first year business programme at the University of Bedfordshire and has both attracted students and supported their transition to higher education learning . Here the learning experience is closer to working in a modern business than a traditional university course. The students work in teams on real- world projects and manage their own meetings and brainstorming sessions, with personal appraisals replacing some essays.The Business Pods were launched in October 2007 and a large diverse cohort of first year undergraduate students (more than 450 students) in the Business School now follow the Pod programme on courses such as advertising and marketing communications and human resources management.

Society for mature learners, University of Wales Institute Cardiff

University of Wales Institute, Cardiff implemented targeted support for mature learners as oftensuch students are unable to participate fully in initial induction activities. A society for mature students was developed to organise social events and facilitate mature learners to meet and chat through electronic social networks. The aim is that this should not be a one-off event, but for the society to grow and be student run from year to year to support the growing number of mature students and the issues they may face.

Using texting to support transition, University of Ulster

The Student Transition and Retention (STAR) project at the University of Ulster also sought to capitalize on students' dominant means of communication: social media. Text message dialogue among students was held to provide emotional and social peer support and create an informal system of interdependent learning around navigating unfamiliar academic and administrative systems. Text messages from university staff, inserted into such dialogues, can enhance the existing

peer support and support students' social integration into university life. Its findings suggested that providing administrative information in induction sessions, in course documentation and on a VLE were insufficient. However, students reported the benefits of the 'Student Messenger' service and were preferable to other web-based communication methods.

4. Relevance and impact

Critical nature of the first 12 months in Higher Education

Much of the literature that has been written in relation to student retention focuses on the importance of the transitional first year experience at university in determining students' persistence in remaining in higher education (Tinto, 1993; Blythman and Orr, 2002). This is the stage where students face large scale changes in their lives: they have potentially left home for the first time, or stopped working, and have to learn how to be financially independent within a constrained budget. They are likely to have concerns about integrating into a new and often large community and they may have to adapt to pedagogies whichare very different from their previous experiences. As a result, students can find it hard to adapt to their new lifestyle and ultimately they may leave their course. However, in considering the issue of first generation access to HE Thomas and Quinn (2006, p.57) state that transition is a naturally occurring state that all of us encounter throughout our lives and as such it is natural to change our minds and alter our course as we deem necessary. This suggests that the issue of poor retention is a more complex issue (and performance indicator) than governments have traditionally been able to admit. Indeed, if we consider the aims and aspirations for students in terms of the acquisition of academic skills (to be examined later in this review), it could be argued that a student who does not complete their course may have considered their situation reflectively; carried out research to reposition themselves to suit their changing needs and then had the confidence to make that change.

Probably, the most prominent (although not necessarily the most important) pinch point in terms of student retention is what Johnston (2010, p. 2) refers to as the "[F]irst Year Experience (FYE)." He further identifies that HEIs need to consider the FYE in terms of the ways that students adapt and change to their new lifestyle in terms of academic, social and cultural transitional issues (ibid, p. 5). It could be suggested that these transitional concerns later manifest themselves as the key areas for concern in terms of the retention and progression of students. According to the National Audit Office (NAO) (2007, p.10) report into student retention, the reasons why students leave higher education can be broadly assimilated into three main categories:

- Personal issues (found to be the most common reason).
- Institution/course related issues.
- Financial issues.

The report further identifies that there are complications involved when considering the issue of student retention as there is "[r]arely one single reason why a student gives up their course." Research carried out by Yorke (1999) lists 39 different reasons (as identified by full-time or sandwich

students who had left higher education) for the early departure of the participants. Yorke (ibid, p. 39) then condensed this list into six categories of concern (not expressed in any prioritised order):

- Poor quality of student experience
- Inability to cope with the demands of the programme
- Unhappiness with the social environment
- Wrong choice of programme
- Matters related to financial need
- Dissatisfaction with matters of institutional provision.

Thus, what the literature has identified is that a series of critical moments, or pinch points, can be identified in a student's journey into and through Higher Education. Many writers identify these critical moments as taking place either before or post-entry to university. However, it seems that these pre- and post-entry issues are often linked and a framework for successful transition thus needs to take close account of that relationship. In fact, it is likely that linking pre- and post-entry pinch points is important in achieving effective transition to higher education. One of the latest proposals from the UK government is to involve universities in the design of A level qualifications, seems to acknowledge the link between cross-sector collaboration and student success, despite the reluctant reception it initially received from professionals in both schools and university sectors.

5. Discussion of findings

The current research from the literature as well as case studies presented for this report highlight the link between specific support structures and measures and access to Higher Education. In the UK, particularly in England,the coalition has introduced a range of policy drivers. Following the abolition of some of the previous government's strategies, such as the national AimHigher programme, responsibility for widening participation and fair access has been transferred to individual institutions. With the introduction of variable tuition fees, and specifically the raising of the cap on variable tuition fees to £9,000 from 2012, HEIs have to demonstrate how they provide fair access. A series of measures was introduced by the government whichare currently being implemented by HEIs. Institutional Access Agreements outline the exact process of how scholarships are being managed, alongside other supportive measures. A more decentralised approach with the onus on institutions, within a nationally applicable framework may lead to greater diversity in HE. The majority of these changes remain very recent or still at the point of implementation. It is therefore too early to understand what the implications of these changes are for Higher Education. Some observers have commented that increasing flexibility, greater structural diversity in the compulsory sector and a corresponding increase in providers' approaches may make those students have historically found it difficult to overcome barriers to Higher Education becoming even less able to do so.

6. References and links to resources/websites (if not included above)

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7. Appendices (if applicable)