

2 | Successful Transition

There is little doubt that student transition from schools and colleges into HE is an important issue. In fact it is becoming ever more topical, linking as it does to a number of major national agendas. Economically the nation requires increasing numbers of high calibre graduates, with particular skill-sets, if it is to compete globally. There are also social justice imperatives, widening participation and community cohesion agendas that necessitate ensuring that students from all backgrounds are able to access and succeed in HE.

Particularly for students from social groups traditionally under-represented in HE, success will often hinge on getting the transition stage right. Without suggesting that students have no responsibility for their own transition through the stages, it is clear that many will need support from the institutions they are passing from and to. Successful transition for many will only really be achieved with much closer cooperation between the sectors – i.e. through schools, colleges and universities working together with students, pre-entry, to better prepare them for the challenges ahead. The Nuffield Review Higher Education Focus Groups Preliminary Report (www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk/files/news53-2.pdf) identified some particular shortcomings or skills gaps amongst students arriving into HE. According to HEIs surveyed, students arriving from schools and colleges are unprepared for, or weak at, writing (especially extended essays), thinking independently, reading critically, basic numeracy and basic literacy.

Schools must, perhaps more than ever before, accept that they are ultimately responsible for equipping their students to progress successfully onto the next stage(s) of their lives. That is surely the primary business of schools – i.e. moving young people successfully along onto appropriate pathways and preparing them to succeed and progress beyond the school gates.

Schools can't be expected to do all of this alone, however. Even within the existing curriculum constraints there is plenty of scope for HEIs to become more pro-active in helping to prepare students for higher-level studies. They can do this chiefly through engaging with schools and working much more closely with the prospective undergraduates therein. Indeed universities must do this if they are to survive as the sector becomes an ever more competitive marketplace. University departments cannot afford to sit back and wait for students to arrive through the door fully prepared and ready to succeed.

Whilst there is certainly plenty still to do for all of us across the sectors it would be false to paint an unnecessarily gloomy picture. Indeed there are a number of positive things already happening and hopefully proliferating.

Positive Examples Across the Sector

- For many the latest 14-19 reforms appear to at least be attempting to address the skills needs of HEIs and employers (www.dcsf.gov.uk/14-19/).
- In many instances, and particularly through the SSAT's, HEI affiliation programme (www.schoolsnetwork.org.uk/affiliation/default.aspx), academic staff in HEIs and schools

are coming together to discuss curriculum issues. As it progresses this will enable staff from both sectors to better prepare and/or receive students at the transition point.

- Aimhigher (www.aimhigher.ac.uk/home/index.cfm) is a high profile and well documented initiative that does much to bring schools into increased contact with HE. It has the potential to be used as the vehicle for a much deeper focus on transition and skills issues in addition to the awareness and aspiration raising work it is currently renowned for.
- Many schools are focussing on "out-of-hours" enrichment activities that free students of the shackles of the curriculum and the exam, and put them at greater liberty to explore subjects and particular topics in their own way – in other words they learn independently. Such activities also develop both depth and breadth of knowledge complementing the learning in the curriculum. HEIs should perhaps seek to involve themselves in these programmes wherever possible. e.g. A number of activities under the new Young, Gifted and Talented provision (ygt.dcsf.gov.uk/HomePage.aspx?stakeholder=3).
- There are a number of instances where school/HE transition is being assisted through projects offering students the opportunity to learn school curriculum topics at a university, in the HE style, and with access to undergraduate role models. These types of input acknowledge the pressure on schools to guide students through exams but also allow some further exploration of selected subjects and offer a different learning style and environment which helps to familiarise students with the differences in teaching and learning in HE compared to that in school. e.g. Slough Grammar School/Brunel University partnership. Contact SGS for details (www.sloughgrammar.berks.sch.uk/contact-us.aspx).
- Higher Education Modules in Schools (HEMiS) projects are enabling schools, through HE partnerships, to offer sixth formers the opportunity to study accredited HE short courses alongside A/AS levels. Whilst a challenging addition to student workloads these courses have been providing participants with the opportunity to develop broader and deeper understanding of chosen subjects. Not only this, but the courses require independent learning and research and offer genuine pre-entry experience of HE study (www.open.ac.uk/yass/).
- The SSAT's (www.schoolsnetwork.org.uk) role in supporting transition: depending on the school they go to, there is currently a huge variation in the levels of support that students might receive in relation to progressing into HE. This support ranges from very good down to virtually zero. The SSAT is committed to addressing that and to creating a much more level playing field for all students regardless of the school they might attend. For more details of this work please visit the HE section of our website (www.schoolsnetwork.org.uk/community/highereducationinstitutions/default.aspx).

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