

Introduction

Only a limited amount of research has investigated transition experiences of students entering tertiary education. This is the case for both pharmacy students and international students, the latter who additionally have to adjust to a new country and education system. Starting university often includes moving away from a familiar environment and the need to change learning habits, from a mainly directed style of learning and teaching to a more independent approach.¹

Aim

The aim was to determine students' views on transition from school to university, including problems which might have occurred during the transition. We also aimed to identify differences in experience for those students completing their secondary education in the UK compared to those completing it elsewhere.

Methods

- November 2016: first year students were asked to take part in the study, two months after starting the course
- December 2016: three face-to-face interviews were completed, each lasting between 20-30 minutes
- The resulting qualitative data was used to create a questionnaire, to find out about transition experiences of the whole student cohort
- The questionnaire included open ended, multiple answer and Likert scale questions (five point Likert-scale: "Strongly agree" to "Strongly disagree")
- March 2017: the questionnaire was handed out to students during a lecture
- The questionnaire consisted of 6 sections, including questions about a first year module, school to university transition and demographics
- The data were analysed using SPSS, Microsoft Excel and QDA Miner.

Results

Interview data:

During the 3 interviews the key themes that emerged were:

1. The struggle between balancing living on their own and coping with the academic requirements

"...in the beginning it was a little bit difficult to manage my time, [...] I need to clean [...] to cook my food, go to school [...] our lectures are like nine to five, usually [...] I'm like, oh where do I get the time to cook or to, like figure out [...] a pattern"

female interviewee 1

2. Adjusting to the more independent style of learning

"I suppose like the main thing is the independence [...] in school you always gonna get teachers pushing you to do it and you have homework all the time. Whereas here it's like you get the occasional thing you have to do, but [...] you have to push yourself to do things, you have to make sure you're always revising[...]"

female interviewee 2

3. The new and unfamiliar environment (e.g. bigger classrooms, more people, ..)

"cause obviously in secondary school a lot of it is more classroom based and like a smaller group of people and here it's like big lecture theatres, more students"

female interviewee 3

Questionnaire data:

- 178 students are currently enrolled, 138 completed the questionnaire; response rate: 77%
- 70% of the respondents are female, 30% male
- 18% of the students who completed the questionnaire have neither a UK nor EU background of secondary education
- 51% of international students (non home or EU secondary educated) agreed or strongly agreed that adjusting in a new country was harder than expected

1. Adjusting in a new environment and the need for support

	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Balancing living independently and coping with academic requirements has challenged me	127	18%	50%	16%	13%	3%
I would have liked more support organising my tasks within the first few weeks at university	137	17%	39%	24%	17%	3%

When asked, what exactly they found difficult or easy in living independently, a significant number of students mentioned the difficulty of handling chores, cooking and shopping on the one hand and the need to keep up with everything which is required for the course on the other.

"its hard to be able to cook/clean etc, revise and go out as the course is quite intense"

"have time in order to cook, clean etc. not enough time to study"

Two respondents' answers to the question "Tell us something you found difficult/easy in living independently."

Furthermore, finding enough self-motivation and being able to manage time seems to be an important issue, too. Although some were coping well, the following comments were given:

"Everything is about self-motivation"

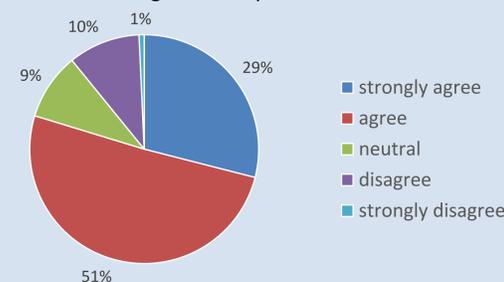
"I found time management easier than expected"

"[There is] less guidance on when to work. Have to be very self motivating and get on with things"

Three respondents' answers to the question "Tell us something you found difficult/easy in living independently."

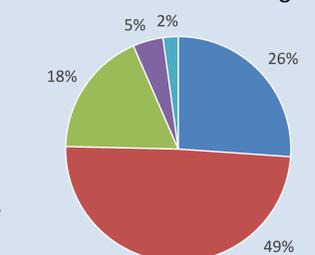
2. Independent learning

I had to change my learning habits after starting university.



The majority of people indicated that they had to change their learning habits and 65% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they were challenged by the academic requirements.

Coping with the academic requirements of the course has challenged me.



"Found the workload difficult and the new techniques you have to use"

Respondents' answer to the question "Please add any comments (positive or negative) about how you coped with adjusting to the academic requirements."

"I have had to spend a lot more time studying that I have had before"

Respondents' answer to the question "Tell us something you found difficult/easy in adjusting to university."

Conclusions

Adjusting in an unfamiliar environment, developing new learning habits and at the same time balancing living independently were challenging for the majority of students. Most of the students reported that they were not prepared enough for the workload they would face at university and they struggled to find an appropriate work-life balance. Supporting students to improve their time management and organisational skills could facilitate their adjustment process. Students with a secondary education background outside of the UK might need additional help to adapt in a new culture.

Limitations: In the questionnaire, students were asked about their views on the school to university transition some 5 months after starting their course. Conducting a survey closer to the start of the academic year may identify additional views about the transition, since the time delay may mean students have forgotten how they felt in their first few weeks at university.

Reference

- ¹Hanna, L.A., Hall, M., Smyth, P., & Daly, S. (2014) "I miss being spoon-fed". A comparison of transition from school to university education from the perspective of undergraduate pharmacy students. *Pharmacy Education*, 14 (1), 37-43