

Transition into Second and Final Year of Undergraduate Study

Much work has been carried out to support students with their induction into university life; their preparedness for higher education, and the first year experience with the aim of supporting the smoothness of their transition from school or college. However, less attention has been paid to supporting students with their transition through the remainder of the university lifecycle, particularly into their second year. Following an exciting year of finding new friends, exploring new subject areas, gaining newfound independence and a long summer vacation of new experiences such as working, travelling etc students can find the challenges of second year to be a surprise eg the need for more independent study, better time management, no significant induction programme, living in new accommodation with different friends, anxiety over future careers etc. This is known as the 'sophomore slump' in the US (Gahagan and Hunter 2006) but it is becoming an increasingly widespread term and is associated with a process which affects students' engagement, achievement and often involves concerns about social and academic identity.

Student View

"As you progress through the years at uni you expect to take on more responsibility for your own studies."

"The talk about Year in Industry was really frightening and we were all worried."

"This [final] year is all about next year."

"We feel more responsible for our destiny."

"We've tried to be more organised this year."

Thinking back, did you feel prepared for your move into the second or final year of study?

Most of the students interviewed had enjoyed a break from academic study over the summer. For some, the length of time away meant it had taken them a few weeks to get back into the swing of University life and study and one second year student talked of feeling as though he had moved from School to University all over again. Some of the final year students had been occupied with fieldwork for their dissertation project over the summer and so had found it easier to transition into academic study.

What have you found to be the main differences between studying in your current year compared with last year?

All of the students said that there was a greater level of independent and self-directed learning with less classroom study hours and more background reading being required than in the previous year. They talked about not having felt the need to carry out 'extra work' in their first year as it didn't contribute to their final degree classification but that they were now very aware of the need to read around the subject and pay specific attention to the reading that their tutors guided them towards. There was a sense that the pace of lectures was much faster such that it was harder to take notes and there was more of a need to go back and review materials and associated background reading. They felt that lecture capture supported this learning experience.

They found the biggest challenges on moving into the second or final year were: getting back into the rhythm of academic study; balancing study with part time employment and / or other activities; time management; willpower to concentrate on studies when living with friends; keeping on top of study and not getting behind.

Were you offered any academic support with your move into second or final year of study? What worked well? What didn't work so well?

All of the students said that they had felt comfortable moving into the higher year and although they could not identify any specific academic support that they had received to assist them with their transition to the higher level of study, they were confident that support was there if they needed it. For example, many of the students would look to their personal tutor as a first port of call to help them with a particular issue or to signpost them to the relevant person / service for support. Others would look to the module leader or lecturer if they had a module specific query. Students were aware of emails from their School or the services across campus offering support but had not yet felt the need to use these. One student had used Skills@Library for support with essay writing and had found it very helpful. Some of the students had used Leeds for Life to search for opportunities to support their professional development whilst others thought that this was a resource to support personal tutoring alone.

Do you think the School / University could have prepared you more fully for your move into second or final year of study? If yes, in what way could this have been done?

All of the students were appreciative of academic staff offering office hours for them to go and ask specific questions about their course etc. However, they talked about finding it intimidating meeting with a member of staff on a one to one basis and that sometimes they found it difficult to articulate their specific difficulties in this situation. One student said that he would look to his peers for support in the first instance and the students suggested that they would welcome more module drop-in sessions where there would feel more confident to ask questions surrounded by course mates.

There was discussion about the VLE and that modules had not appeared visible to students until the first week of teaching. They would welcome them being visible in early September in order to see reading lists earlier and to have more of an appreciation of what to expect from the module. Suggestions for improvements also included an easily accessible outline syllabus on the module VLE page and inclusion of a summary of associated module material learnt in the previous year as a reminder / refresh to prepare them for what they were about to learn. Students also suggested that they would welcome a short activity / exercise to carry out as a recap of what they had learnt in the previous year ahead of their arriving back at University.

Final year students referred to pressure of the expectation that they knew what they were going to do after their degree and they would welcome some advice / training on how to prepare for the Careers Fairs that are on campus ie what questions should they ask employers, preparation of CVs. One student referred to a 'Prepare for the Fair' event in the Careers Centre but that this was fully subscribed from an early stage.

What do you remember as the most helpful advice you have been given in the first few weeks of this semester?

Many of the students could not recall specific advice that they had been given and felt as though they had been launched straight back into academic life without fully understanding what to expect. The second year students suggested that it would have been helpful to have had the opportunity to hear from, and talk with, students in

their final year. They were keen to hear about the amount of private study hours needed, workload, number of deadlines. All of the students said they were keen to obtain some feedback on their work early in the semester so that they could build on this for future assessments.

What useful advice would you provide to students to prepare them for their move into second or final year of study?

Students said they regularly used last year's notes from lectures to check back on material related to the modules they were now studying. They advised starting assessments sooner and not leaving them to the last minute; to plan ahead, knowing key dates and deadlines; to think about their dissertation topic early on; and to make use of Leeds for Life in order to provide the personal tutor with information for future references they may have to provide.

In light of student feedback the **following recommendations** are suggested to enhance the support for students transitioning between undergraduate levels:

- Expectations and differences: provide second year students with the opportunity to ask questions and talk with students in the final year about their experiences and advice.
- Preparation for study: provide access to modules on the VLE before students arrive to enable them to access reading lists; consider adding an outline syllabus and summary of relevant material from modules in earlier years:
- Confidence building: consider group drop in sessions to supplement office hours so that less confident students feel more comfortable asking questions in a group rather than on a one to one basis.

Case Study: Faculty of Biological Sciences *Contact: Sue Whittle*

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Online resource to support transition to level 2

An online resource is based within the VLE and helps students prepare appropriately for the new academic year, and reminds them of the resources available to them to help them if they face academic or personal difficulties, with the intention of getting them ready to start studies again. The resource consists of four sections:

1. Academic work – helping students use the information they have acquired in their first year to support their work in the second year.
2. Skills – helping students reflect on the skills gained during first year and which new skills they will need to develop for success in second year.
3. Careers – helping students think about their career readiness and if they are considering applying for a year in industry.
4. Academic and pastoral support – compilation of available resources and advice on mitigating circumstances.

There are also videos from students in year 3 providing advice on preparing students for their second year.

Student Voice: Lifelong Learning Centre

“I’m currently in my last year of BA Geog and considering doing a Masters in Global Development. This is something I NEVER imagined myself doing.” Tina Brocklebank

Resources

Cashmore A & Scott J (2012) *Fragmented Transitions: moving to the 2nd year*. HEA STEM Annual Conference 2012: Proceedings - ISBN 978-1-907207-45-7

https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/disciplines/stem/Conf_12_Scott

Gahagan, J and Hunter, M S (2006), *The second-year experience: Turning attention to the academy's middle children*, *About Campus*, 11, pp 17–22

Milsom, C, Stewart, M, Yorke, M and Zaitseva, E (2014) *Stepping up to the Second Year at University: Academic, psychological and social dimensions*. SRHE

Thompson S (2013) *The forgotten year: tackling the ‘sophomore slump’*. HEA report.
<https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/project/forgotten-year-tackling-%E2%80%98sophomore-slump%E2%80%99#sthash.sUEwB2OU.dpuf>