# Outsiders in transition: exploring the experiences of college students joining university programmes already in progress

Abstract

Students transitioning from further education at colleges to join the second or third year of undergraduate programmes at universities must quickly adapt to a new learning environment and new expectations. As highlighted in previous literature, transition is not simply academic but social and emotional as students form a new identity for themselves as learners. Two programmes at different universities were selected to provide contrasting examples of student experience, subject content, different institutional approaches, and student profile. Surveys and focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis to identify key themes in a bottom-up approach. A key finding was that similar transition issues persist despite substantial a range of formal intervention attempts led by the programme teams. Our analysis suggests that some students are able to partly manage the transition for themselves by engaging with informal groups and study in ways which put them outside the traditional university experience but which, through their focus on efficiency, may still capture the essence of what it means to be an independent learner at university. As part of bridging this formal and informal divide, it is suggested that programme tutors may usefully adopt a boundary-crossing role as invited members of these informal and often online spaces. Finally, we reflect on implications for the formality of the tutor role and whether the previous literature on the risks of students adopting surface approaches to learning may need to be reconsidered to account for a new type of student professionalism.

Introduction

For any student making the transition to higher education, retention and success are predicated on building a sense of belonging among peers (Thomas, 2012). There is also growing recognition of the challenges faced by students in certain situations – such as those who lack financial support, have care responsibilities, work part-time, or are returning to education after a long gap – as well as a need to resist the urge to pigeonhole students into groups and instead consider students in transition as individuals (Goodchild, 2017). Such premature classification can be especially tempting when students arrive in the second or third year of a programme already in progress, marking them as different from those who joined in year 1 and suggesting that they will be similar to each other as they come in a group from the same FE college. This study attempts to better understand nuances of such students by taking a sample from two different programme types at different types of university in different student funding situations.

The motivation for better understanding the range of student needs in a newly arriving cohort is grounded in the assumption that students who make a successful transition tend to perform better academically and adopt more meaningful approaches to learning (Marton & Saljo, 2005). In contrast, those who are disconnected may not leave their programmes but will engage superficially, focusing just on assessment demands rather than on learning (Entwistle, 2000). Likewise, withdrawing from a programme has been shown to be less about students struggling with academic demands and more about not feeling that study is relevant or worthwhile (Yorke, 2002). Thus, strategies to engage students with a sense of group belonging will form the core of any transition or induction strategy – reflecting a conventional wisdom that students in groups are engaged, while students as isolated individuals are vulnerable.

The study also takes students as they self-organise, resisting classifying them by their FE college or any other characteristic unless the students themselves identify it as meaningful. This openness allowed the importance of social media to emerge from the results, showing the often spontaneous groups students that form for themselves, often around rather random factors such as who lives or works near each other or who met who on an open day. The two case studies reported here show a potential new way of approaching students’ integration and group identity and how it might be helpful to think about groups of students forming with an outsider identity. It is recommended that tutors can usefully engage with students in informal online spaces to make induction more personalised and engaging. It is also suggested that this new category of student identity – outsiders bound together – can challenge the traditional narrative of staff and students being in conflict over assessments, and offers a useful starting point for greater partnership in student induction.

## Background: insiders and outsiders

Thinking of students as forming groups within the university has its origins in the notion that staff and students have different intentions for how students should study. One of the first descriptions of student groups described how peer groups passed on information from one cohort to the next rather than, as was previously thought, each new group finding their own way (Newcomb & Baird, 1966). This highlighted how university-led induction was not the sole means by which students learnt how things worked. Instead, Newcomb and Baird's US-based study found that students were forming groups to share assessment tips, past papers, model answers, and insights into the quirks of individual tutors. These secret relationships made it easier to maintain a “respectable average” (Newcomb & Baird, 1966), not so good as to arouse suspicion nor so poor as to risk failing a programme. Rather than each individual working as hard as they could or taking their own approach to learning, this was the first study to suggest a ‘herd mentality’ of doing just well enough as the rationale for students forming groups.

Later, a group of sociologists looking to document every aspect of student life soon found that assessment was such a dominant theme that everything else needed to be understood through this lens. Termed the GPA (Grade Point Average) perspective, it was argued that maintaining a grade average was akin to maintaining a financial buffer in everyday life (Becker, Geer, & Hughes, 1968). Believing that they must “search out those professorial idiosyncrasies that may affect their grade” (Becker et al., 1968), students would form relationships with peers to get at this tacit information which they saw as vital to knowing what was expected of them. Indeed, many students were observed to obsess about this information at the expense of time spent studying. Their desire to avoid any risk in their assessments meant that they played too safe to excel and had an insatiable demand for assessment guidance such that any assessment would effectively be reduced to an ability to recall what the tutor had said. Again, the average dominated: students were a group in the sense that they were opposed to a faculty who they saw as unreliable, idiosyncratic, or as trying to force students to work harder than they needed to.

As universities opened up their enrolment and became a route into the professions, this sense of students as a homogeneous group diminished. Some students seemed to agree that they should work hard, and came to resent those students they saw as avoiding work or seeking unfair reward. Thus, students were no longer just in conflict with faculty but were occasionally in conflict with each other. The students described in Newcomb and Baird (1966) and Becker et al. (1968) could now be described as “college men” and “sorority women” (Horowitz, 1988). Seeing university as a final break before adulthood and their career as either predetermined or more to do with contacts than ability, this group had achieved an insider status with a tacit understanding of what was required to achieve a ‘Gentleman’s C’. Working hard would therefore be seen as poor form as it risked raising faculty expectations for what the average student should be doing.

In opposition to this group, Horowitz described a new breed of ‘Outsiders’. This was a group fresh to university who trusted faculty to treat them fairly. These students therefore took to heart the value of hard work and pleasing their tutors, rejecting the alternative rewards and social groups of the College Men. As campuses became more politically active, other groups of students could be identified as rejecting both these groups and the faculty in favour of trying to reshape the campus to their own vision. This put efficiency back on the agenda as they, just like the College Men, needed to maintain an acceptable average.

As the late 1980s saw university enrolment increase again and a greater focus on the degree as vocational, Horowitz (1988) described how these three groups – termed College Men, Outsiders, and Rebels – diminished substantially as a new individualism emerged. This new pseudo-group was named the New Outsiders as they once again rejected the status quo. Where the original Outsiders can be seen as embodying a resentment of upper-class mediocrity, the New Outsiders were focused less on the university experience and more on maximising the rewards they could earn. Rather than maintaining an acceptable average, students saw themselves as competing against each other and needing not just to work hard but to work efficiently at finding those same clues the College Men and Rebels came to rely on for their maintenance goals. Putting these cues together with hard work meant that the New Outsider could push for ever-higher grades by working hard while being aware of shortcuts. These students were in conflict with the other groups since they were raising faculty expectations of how hard students should be working, with the previous 'safety in numbers' approach giving way to competition between students.

As similar research emerged in the UK, this New Outsider individualism seemed so widespread that it seemed more suitable to think about students as individuals in their approaches to assessment. Miller and Parlett (Miller & Parlett, 1974) did this by categorising students by their ability to pick up on short-cuts, taking for granted that they would seek them. Later, this would be linked to a student’s approach to learning based on their perception of each individual task. The more authentic and meaningful the task, the more likely students were to take a deeper approach to learning, while a perception that this was something they only needed for the purpose of assessment would lead to surface approaches (Marton, Hounsell, & Entwistle, 1984). Marton and Saljo (Marton & Saljo, 2005) were later able to draw upon Rossum and Schenk (Rossum & Schenk, 1984) to link surface and deep approaches to learning to the idea that students have different aims for different tasks. Students would take a surface approach when they thought they needed to increase their knowledge, memorise information, or acquire facts for a particular purpose. It was only when students aimed to abstract meaning, understand concepts, or develop as a person that they would take a deep approach. This reinforced the individualised rather than group experience of engagement, with students strategically choosing their learning aims since programmes were now so demanding that a deep approach to every task would be overwhelming. Efficiency was now part of how students needed to manage the demands of study to carve out the space for meaningful learning, and students did so alone.

## Group belonging and engagement

Group belonging is not just about having a sense of community or support to help through difficulties, although it is partly this. Group belonging can be linked with social theories of learning and the desire for students to join a Community of Practice in which informal or tacit learning is embodied (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). This links well with professional and higher education in which knowledge can often be tacit and part of a student’s education should be learning what is valued in their profession and how to self-evaluate and improve their work to meet such standards (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Sadler, 2010). Students transitioning into a new identity as students or as professionals will therefore develop their sense of identity and their sense of the workplace in tandem as a form of “mutual constitution” or “interplay” (Wenger, 1998). Interest in how students form groups consequently deals with how students engage with their subject and form a professional identity.

The sample in this study suits this situation well. Direct entry students at two post-1992 universities were sampled across two programmes, Engineering (n=24) and Business and Events (n=56). These students would have several possible group identities as insiders or outsiders: many were in work, older than many students on the programmes they were joining, or may have brought a group identity with them from their HE colleges. How they saw themselves, the faculty, and their new peer group was of interest in this study since students were at a point where substantial interplay might be expected. Two different funding situations and subject areas would add further contrast. in the previous studies, the Business Studies students found two types of competitiveness: students could strategically engage with the group to benefit from feedback, but might strategically disengage to prevent others from taking advantage of their insights (Hwang & Arbaugh, 2006). Conversely, Business students have also been found to be highly collaborative and supportive, engaging in genuine communities of practice (Masika & Jones, 2016). It might similarly be assumed that Engineering students would take more strategic and efficient approaches, although there are examples of this including collaboration and informal self-help groups with electronics students (Entwistle et al., 2005).

## Sample and methods

The study set out to look at the induction experiences of two cohorts of students. Following ethical approval at both universities, participants were invited to anonymously complete online surveys created using Google Forms. The survey ended with an opt-in choice for anyone willing to participate in focus groups, which were led by a senior academic with whom the students were familiar. Students were assured that participation was voluntary, their data would be anonymous, and that they could withdraw at any point prior to data anonymisation without needing to give a reason. They were also assured that whether they participated or not would have no influence on their academic progress. Prompts for discussion were taken from general trends in the survey responses, making this a multi-stage and mixed-methods study. Focus groups were audio-recorded, then transcribed and coded using thematic analysis by a researcher from a third university. This same researcher also conducted more in-depth analysis of the online survey using inferential statistics, as discussed below, to add an iterative element of data analysis.

The survey response rate was 58% for a total sample size of 80. The survey asked open questions about what went well and what could be improved in their induction as well as more general opportunities to comment on their experience. This was supplemented with closed questions about common motivations to study or why a particular programme or university was chosen, as well as eight Likert-type items rating various aspects of the student experience and three general satisfaction ratings about the quality of advice given in college, the quality of teaching at university, and the quality of the learning experience at university. Participants were also asked if they would like to join a focus group, and 14 students later participated in three focus groups to discuss themes emerging from the survey responses.

Sampled students were broadly representative of direct entrants on their programmes, with gender and age balanced across the range. Table 1 shows the age distribution and table 2 shows gender distribution, with both being typical of the age and gender of direct entry students in these universities more generally.

Table 1 Age distribution of respondents

Table 2 Gender distribution of respondents

Comparisons based on the two programmes (and so, by extension, university), age ranges, and genders were made using independent t-tests and ANOVA for responses to the Likert-type items while simple percentage comparisons for open and nominal responses were made using coding from Atlas.ti. After determining that there were no statistically significant differences on these dimensions, responses were treated as coming from a comparable sample and all 80 responses analysed together. This enabled correlation analysis and the use of the same prompts in all three focus groups. This decision was supported by the very similar discussions resulting from the three focus groups, showing the value of mixed-methods data for understanding the features of a sample population.

Qualitative data from the survey was then later combined with the focus group transcripts. A bottom-up coding approach was used, which was then turned into 18 common themes during second-cycle coding (Saldaña, 2015). These themes were discussed among the research team in relation to the approaches to learning literature. A final round of coding then applied a top-down thematic analysis to see which of these models could function as a theoretical framework. Insights from this process are discussed below, interspersed with the second-stage analysis of the quantitative data in response to questions prompted by the qualitative data analysis.

## Results

The lack of statistically significant differences based on programme, age or gender groups is an interesting result in itself since the groups were intended as a contrast. The fact that groups were essentially statistically indistinguishable added support 30 years on to Horowitz’s (1988) argument that students are becoming more similar, than they are different. A summary of responses to each of the Likert-type items is shown in the chart below, with correlation analysis and discussion of responses to the other survey items incorporated with the qualitative data analysis in the following sub-sections. Thematic coding of the focus group data resulted in 18 broad themes which were later re-categorised for second-cycle coding to draw out the key themes, of which efficiency was found to be especially illuminating to the extent that it refocused the study on students' group identities.

The chart below (Figure 1) shows responses to the Likert-type items in the survey, showing that students have a very different social media relationship with each other than they do their institution. Limited engagement with staff and the broader university community was similarly contrasted against a higher than expected collaboration with peers. Looking at this through the lens of efficiency highlights how students seemed to be more positive of tutors who were not regarded as 'the university', but rather became quasi members of students' informal communities through being more available and helpful.

Figure 1 Responses to Likert-type items

### Learning expectations

Of the 109 different reasons given for choosing to take a degree, the majority (55%) described better job prospects with similar sentiment in improved salary as a motivation (24%). Other motivations included gaining an enhanced qualification (42%) and a new experience (17%). Close links to a profession were also discussed in the focus groups, with discussion of their learning at university being more “real” or “proper” than at college. This included a more focused curriculum, authentic assessments, and higher demands for independent learning without the “safety net” of college. One notable discussion around the need for mathematical ability exemplified this well as students discussed how college had failed to prepare them for the demands of the university programme, rather than questioning whether they needed such skills. Students seemed to trust the relevance of the programme and deem their participation as worthwhile, even while complaining about the burden of assessment and dominance of essays as an assessment strategy. As with Horowitz’s (1988) Outsiders, the strong link between university study and the professions seemed to motivate students to work hard and align their personal goals with those of their programme. Related to this was an acceptance of the university expectation of independent learning, where it might be expected that students felt neglected when comparing their recent college-based experience. One student described this shift in expectations:

We all go on courses with work and, frankly, when I go on a course with work I expect to be taught the subject. I’m having to reframe that here slightly in that I’m here to learn it with you a bit and a bit myself, but that’s really alien to us. We’ve spent all our working careers being sent on tens of courses where it’s ‘you will be taught this’ and if you’re not taught it then you’ve got every right to complain about it…you’re giving us the learning environment, not the knowledge

This was intriguing since the main reason given for choosing the university was the specific programme on offer (36%), which could have implied that students were seeking to develop specific skills or gain specific knowledge. Instead, it seems that students were happy with the different learning expectations compared with college or work courses.

### Peer support

The discussion of learning style also related to how students identified as a group of direct entry students. One focus group discussed how they were content to be labelled as direct entry students as the group gave them support. As one student put it, “If we’re helping each other, does it matter what the label says?”. Some students also emphasised their professional experience as part of their group identity, so rather than seeing themselves as a group lacking experience of university study they saw themselves as a group with the advantage of work experience. This was neatly summarised as “we’re not disadvantaged; we just don’t know how it [university] works”.

Peer support was a surprising story within these results, particularly in how students created informal groups online. Many students worked together outside of class despite often not living near each other or having dedicated study time. The responses to the Likert-type questions show a strong contrast in how students engaged with their peers and with their university. There was minimal contact with the university through social media and a lack of feeling part of the university community, but extensive contact with peers through social media and generally positive views of how other students approached learning and enjoyment of time on campus. Students were reporting engaging with peers in a very different way from how they engaged with the university. Their online interaction was similarly high among themselves but did not generally involve the university beyond accessing resources.

The main source of support seemed to be reassurance and sharing practical information. Students referred to the first month as especially challenging as they felt overwhelmed by the new expectations. Some described how they did not “have to read books or journals before”, or had “never written an essay”. Others described how expectations were “much, much higher” and a “sudden” increase from college to university. This was most notable in the mathematics expectations on the engineering programme, but was also a concern more generally. One student summarised this by recounting a tutor saying “cast your mind back to first year, this is super simple stuff” and feeling out of their depth because they had never covered the material at college. Peer support helped in two respects: one, students could share resources and help each other find out about support available such as peer tutoring. Second, and perhaps most importantly, it gave reassurance that feeling overwhelmed was a common experience. An engineering student explained just how important this was in getting through the first month: “it gets a lot easier after the first month, the second semester modules are easier than first semester”. This was echoed by another student describing his decision to stay: “It felt much harder in the first month, everyone seemed to know what they were talking about and I thought ‘am I going to pull out?’. Then you sort of settle down. Several people left in that first month”. Having a peer from the year above tell you that the first month was tougher than the later programme or that everyone felt the same way was therefore crucial in helping students to persist through this difficult time.

Students also gave each other practical information such as where to find online resources, navigate around campus, how to submit assignments, study tips for managing their time, and finding study spaces off campus such as through the SCONUL scheme. This also helped to overcome communication breakdown for those who did not find out about key dates, with a substantial minority of students missing induction days or only finding out through a colleague or WhatsApp group. Peer support was also important for reassurance when students were unsure about their progress or if they were meeting expectations. When they might otherwise have felt overwhelmed, it was reassuring that:

none of us seem to know if we’re on track or not, we’re all assuming we are because we talk with each other therefore if the mob is in that position then everyone must be in that position because everyone can’t fail…it’s like survival of the masses, a herd of wildebeest where a few outliers get picked off by the lions.

This simile suggested a group of similar achievers, suggesting that it was important for students to feel they were among like-minded and similarly able peers. There also seemed to be a sense of risk uniting the group so that nobody deviated too far from the norm. This is a marked contrast with discussions of the college “safety net” where tutors ensured survival, suggesting that peer support was much more important in the university environment.

### Online engagement

Students clearly distinguished between social media contact with peers and with the university. Some students wanted to keep their social media separate from their studies, particularly Facebook or places where they shared photos and their private lives. Others were happy to engage with Facebook groups but did not want to be friends with university pages. In part this was explained as a desire to avoid “spamming”, a similar issue raised with university email accounts where some students stopped checking their emails because they received too many irrelevant emails and adverts for social events. There was greater comfort with WhatsApp since students could make these groups for themselves and have sub-groups. On these terms, many students thought it would be helpful to have some WhatsApp groups with their tutors as members so that advice and information could be quality controlled. This echoes similar advice in social media marketing that companies must give customers control over their communications (Martin & Murphy, 2017) and that engagement with personalised content is only successful when customers feel in control of their own data (Tucker, 2014).

Students were also keen for more online engagement, including how-to videos and knowing that teleconferencing was available as part of normal contact with tutors rather than being a special arrangement they would have to make. There was also some support for more formal forums than WhatsApp groups where peers from the year above could offer guidance, although this was always discussed along with the need for tutors to make sure that such advice was still relevant. In one specific case this seemed due to referencing guidelines changing from one year to the next and some information not being updated, but there was also a general sense that students were only fully reassured when a tutor gave their approval.

### Cue-seeking

In addition to giving advice to each other in peer groups, students described what the approaches to learning literature would call cue-seeking behaviour. Students spent a lot of time trying to figure out what was needed for an assessment. This was seen as varying from tutor to tutor, and being “a gamble” to know what was required. Students were very keen to have exemplars of good work, though again were wanting this from each tutor rather than trusting that generic criteria would apply in all cases. In this respect, traditional entry students were thought to “get their first year free” to figure out what is required, and some direct entry students discussed how they may get lower marks while they figure out new expectations or have to readjust to a new tutor. Students were particularly concerned that they had not written at the required level before, and so were unprepared by their college course. Concerns about practicalities of layout and referencing were most common, with general “writing expectations” also needing to be figured out as was the amount of wider reading required. Again, this seemed rather inefficient with “each lecturer doing their own thing” as regards blackboard layout or assessment expectations. This was compounded by inconsistencies between college and university, so the only way students felt that they got reliable information was directly from tutors or as assessment feedback.

Descriptions of cue-seeking behaviour may have been less candid since focus groups were facilitated by programme tutors, but the discussions still gave a sense that cue-seeking was not about taking short-cuts or gaining an edge. Instead, students saw cue-seeking as necessary due to the inconsistency and unreliability of information coming from the university. Each tutor needed to be figured out, even to the level of how they liked essays presented on the page or their personal take on what were meant to be universal referencing guides. This echoes some of the reasons given by the students interviewed in Becker et al. (1968), but while that study saw students as cue-seeking to mitigate an adversarial faculty bent on getting students to work ever harder, these direct entry students saw tutors as benign but constrained by an inefficient system. Students were not cue-seeking in opposition to faculty, but seemed united with a select few trusted tutors in opposition to the inefficient and idiosyncratic body known as The University.

### Efficiency

Efficiency emerged as the dominant theme in the first-cycle coding of the focus group interviews. It was the surprising way that students talked about efficiency that prompted the second-cycle coding to look specifically at students’ approaches to learning and group formation rather than just their experience of induction and transition.

Poor information flow from both colleges and universities prompted discussion of inefficiencies. Some students were delayed from registering because their certificates were not ready, while others did not receive information in a timely enough manner to make arrangements for their other commitments. In some cases, this meant missing induction entirely – several students came one to three days late and one came three weeks late – since they did not find out when it was until they phoned the university. Email seemed to be especially problematic. Some students were told that they could not be given information until they were fully registered, but the main problem seemed to be that students were told that they would be contacted later with details but never were. By the time students chased up in person, it was often too late to take time off work. As one student described:

They said they’d contact you closer to the time. It got to August/September time and nothing came through. I’d sent multiple emails saying ‘what’s happening, when do we enrol?’ You just got emails back saying ‘Don’t worry about it, we’ll get in contact when the time is right’. When it got to the week before we’re meant to start I rang up and said I need to speak to somebody. They put me through to [tutor] and she sorted it that day. Within an hour or so we’d got a date when to start…if I hadn’t have pushed, I’d still be waiting at home.

This example set the tone of students needing to speak to their tutors to get an efficient response on what should have been routine matters. Other students who did not get to speak to a tutor found out too late: “I asked ‘when’s the induction?’ and they said ‘yesterday’.” Others found out from colleagues that it was the next day, received the wrong information so came on the wrong day, while one particularly patient student phoned to find out that he had missed the first two weeks of the programme. There was obviously much discussion of being irritated by these inefficiencies, but it was striking that students took a pragmatic approach in their recommendations. They included asking for generic information pages they could access before results were confirmed, a key dates email, or even a list of what information they should have by when so that they knew when they needed to chase up administrators. Some WhatsApp groups had already formed by this stage, so the scraps of information managed to flow despite some central problems.

One student described “having to hound” administrators to get basic information, so it was understandable that academic tutors soon became relied upon for efficient communication. Tutors were praised for responding quickly to emails and being easy to access on campus and, later, by phone and video. However, it was more difficult to efficiently know what was expected in assessments. As much as guidance was given, it was seen as too generic and not explicit enough about what tutors expected. Students referred to the two years students who enrolled on the programme from year 1 had benefited from in terms of figuring out each tutor’s preferences, and there was some resentment that direct entry students were immediately subject to summative assessments rather than having the same formative opportunities.

Students were particularly keen on exemplars of assessed student work as clear examples of what tutors wanted. Exemplars come highly recommended in the assessment and feedback literature (Carless & Chan, 2017; Yucel, Bird, Young, & Blanksby, 2014), but are advocated more for their ability to stimulate dialogue as a way of communicating tacit values rather than making those tacit values explicit as efficiently as possible. Figuring out the essence of good work seems to have been missed by these students, and many discussions of exemplars really seemed to be more about having a straightforward model. This may be fine for routine matters such as layout, referencing, or picking up on subject norms such as avoiding person-based writing. For more in-depth, slowly-learnt academic literacies, such a desire for efficiency could be more problematic.

Efficiency also seemed to relate to group identity. While the survey responses showed that direct entry students still saw the students already on the programme as having positive attitudes about their learning, there was still a distinction between direct entry students and those who had luxuries of time. Sometimes this was simple scheduling. One student noted that direct entry students could not access mathematics tutors because the tutors worked different days to the days students were released from work. Others noted geographical convenience since students enrolled on the programme from the start tended to live nearer to campus and so could come in for just a few hours or return for evening events with relative ease. In contrast, direct entry students saw themselves as needing to maximise their time.

Practical efficiencies involved finding course-mates who lived locally and so could be met without needing to travel onto campus. Others found study spaces at other universities convenient. Weighing up time and commuting costs had similarly prompted one student to look for a local mathematics tutor since paying for one locally could be more efficient that travelling to campus for free support. Students were welcoming of intense days to justify the time off work and their travel costs, with some students staying late into the evening to enjoy the protected study time. Some students shared study tips on how to make the best use of their time on campus, such as writing 500-word summaries at the end of each lecture. As one student put it, “we try to do as much as we can here because we’ve got time here”. Others took a more commuter-like approach, where “you do your course and then you go home”. Efficiency could therefore stimulate or diminish group learning approaches depending on an individual’s perspective.

Efficiency was strongly linked with personalisation. Students wanted to have clear, specific guidance on how to access the electronic resources they would need. Ideally, these would be videos made by their tutor. Similarly, rather than a general induction, they appreciated meeting tutors and many stated a preference for module-level mini-inductions throughout the year rather than a front-loaded and more generic induction. There were some potential frustrations for tutors in this, with complaints that students did not go to the induction because they did not think it was relevant often followed by complaints that they did not know about something that was covered in the induction. However, the pressure of competing demands on these students may put this in better context. Some students described 16-hour days to travel onto campus, while plenty more sacrificed social and personal lives to meet study and work commitments of 60 or 70 hours per week. Deadline bunching meant having to work as efficiently as possible, so attending a two-week programme and waiting to sift the key information was wasting precious time. One student described how “you’ve got to be running at 99% efficiency” to manage all these demands. This stood out in the analysis as explaining why cue-seeking was not about taking short-cuts, but was a necessary response to overwhelming demands and frustrating inefficiencies inherent in a system which assumes students have the luxury of full-time study. Unfortunately, this puts a greater burden on university tutors to take on a role similar to a college tutor in managing many of the practicalities of students’ learning. However, it is at least reassuring to think that students do so not because they want their “safety net” back. These students were agreed on the importance of independent learning and can be seen simply as cue-seeking to mitigate against barriers to being able to give this the time it deserves.

### Discussion: New ‘new outsiders’?

The students in this study seem to be forming small groups within their broader identity as direct entry students, often based on chance aspects such as making friends during induction or living near to each other. They seem to have largely positive regard for the students already on the programme they were joining, but seem less connected with them. Rather, they gain support from other direct entry students in the year above whose experience more closely resembles their own. These students also retain a professional identity, but still see university study as something special and distinct from their professional learning experiences to date. As with Horowitz’s (1988) Outsiders, they align their goals with the goals of their programme. This makes sense since they mainly chose their university study with a specific programme and career progression goal in mind. Despite the long hours and competing demands on their time, these students did not fall into the pattern of historical groups such as College Men and Rebels where cue-seeking was used as part of maintaining an acceptable average. Instead, these students generally worked as hard as they could and sacrificed a great deal in their domestic lives to give their university study the time it deserved. An acceptable average was not something they used to avoid working harder than necessary, but rather was a way of finding reassurance that they were doing enough. This seems a crucial distinction, absent in how student groups have previously been described. It was discussed in the literature review how the 'herd mentality' seemed to disappear as students became individuals rather than groups, but it seems there is still a desire for students to reference their behaviour to their peers in order to understand what is expected of them and how hard they should be working.

Efficiency is key to the identity of this group. This is not to avoid the need to take deep approaches to learning or to carve out time for other interests, but is an entirely rational response to the perception that The University is an inefficient and idiosyncratic place to work and study. This puts a burden on tutors to be the final arbiter in what should be routine information from administration or disseminated through online information. Peers can offer tips and support to mitigate such inefficiencies, but the reliance on key tutors for all information risks information bottle-necks and over-stretching academic staff. The ideal solution would be for the university to be a more efficient place with clearer communications, but online peer support has been shown to help achieve this, without needing to wait for more fundamental institutional reforms. Students are self-organising using social media that they control, creating groups which the university may not even know about. Tutors signalling their openness to engaging with students on their terms might find themselves invited to join such groups, potentially adding greater efficiency and reliability to the information exchanged online. There is already some communication from one cohort to the next, so finding ways to maintain these groups so that they mature rather than respawn could further support students in feeling that they are treading a familiar path. Such informal groups could add to the emphasis on programme design enabling “coherence, continuity and connectedness” in learning across a programme (Nisbet, Entwistle, McQuillin, & Robinson, 2005). A simple recommendation could be to signal explicitly to students if expectations or tasks have changed from one year to the next, helping to reduce uncertainty as modules or materials are revised.

Was Horowitz (1988) right in saying that students were becoming more similar than different, and that group identity was disappearing? Certainly, students seemed to identify less by gender, age, or social class than might be expected. They also seemed to hold other groups of students in high regard and were far less individualistic or in conflict with each other than might have been expected based on Horowitz’s final description of most students as New Outsiders looking to maximise individual rewards. The students in this study seemed to take a genuine approach to learning, cue-seeking only as much as necessary to make sure their efforts were fairly rewarded. Within the limits of these two samples, and reassured by the similarities between what were intended to be contrasting groups, there seems to be evidence of a more collaborative community among students. This seems not to go as far as to qualify as a community of practice, but it recognises that students are willing to take charge of their own university experience and will use social media to collaborate if official communications are not deemed sufficient. In contrast with earlier conceptions of student groups, this group has not formed in opposition to other student groups or centred around a common philosophy. Instead they are united by a need for efficiency and mutual support which makes them double outsiders: outside the university, but also outside individualist student norms.

## Implications

The similar experiences of what were intended to be contrasting groups of students suggests that induction needs are more similar than they are different between different subject groups and could potentially open opportunities for cross-subject induction events, helping to consolidate much needed resources. Ongoing support that engages with students' informal and online communities is much more efficient from students' perspectives, which makes it more effective and engaging. Front-loaded, formal induction may be more efficient for the university, but is not recommended. Instead, students may see the use of ongoing WhatsApp groups as a key support in their learning, by improving the efficiency of communication with students, as a viable alternative. This could easily be extended to include mentors and/or tutors in WhatsApp groups. The study has also highlighted the importance of meeting students' expectations of professionalism so that their time on campus is well-spent, communications are clear, and that students can make efficient use of their university experience. Commonality in the transition experience also suggests that stimulating informal peer groups, perhaps even across different subject areas, could help offer additional support as students adapt to their new environment, and that this need not be limited to students' subject areas.

## Next steps

This project aimed to better understand how students experienced transition as direct entrants so that enhanced induction processes could better help meet their needs. More specifically, it set out to explore whether online engagement could help overcome problems with information gaps, communication breakdown, and students’ schedule conflict or lack of opportunity to physically come onto campus. With this concept of the direct entry students as a common group, the next stage of this study will be to look at how this group matures over the years, and how they perform, in relation to their peers on the same programmes. It will be particularly interesting to look at whether support for this common group needs to remain student-directed and local, or if there is any scalability that can be added to reduce unnecessary repetition.

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