Transitioning to university as a nursing student: Thematic analysis of written reflections☆

Steven Pryjmachuk*, Caitlin McWilliams, Bernie Hannity, Janet Ellis, Jane Griffiths

School of Health Sciences, Jean McFarlane Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT

Background: The international literature has largely conceptualised transition to university as a process of adjustment to both the social and the academic demands of university life. Several factors influence this process including: student, parent and university staff expectations; student preparedness; and student belongingness. Moreover, some student groups (groups well-represented in nursing) appear to have particular difficulty in successfully transitioning to university life.

Study Aims: To explore first year nursing students' experiences of the transition to university; to compare nursing students' experiences with those of other disciplines and identify ways of easing the transition for nursing students.

Methodology: As part of their coursework, first year nursing students at an English University submitted a 500-word, formative reflection on the transition to university. Anonymised reflections from 161 students were available to the researchers for thematic content analysis; 50 reflections, however, proved sufficient for 'information power'.

Results: Two main themes emerged from the data: (i) 'managing expectations', an overarching theme that permeated most of the reflections; and (ii) 'practical tools and support aids', the practical, concrete actions that either the university took, or the students developed themselves, to ease the transition. Both themes embraced inter-related academic, social and personal domains.

Conclusions: Nursing students' transition experiences are similar to those of other university students. However, the particular demographics of nursing student cohorts amplifies certain aspects of the transition experience: more students who are likely to struggle with transition but also more students who embrace the developmental aspects of going to university. Transition requires joint enterprise between students and university staff, especially in terms of expectations and the support required to become independent learners. Transitions can be eased by tapping into student resourcefulness and seeing transition as a gradual process that cuts across academic, social and personal dimensions rather than as a short, one-off event.

1. Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK), like much of the developed world, has seen significant growth in participation in higher education (HE) in recent years (Universities UK, 2014; Marginson, 2016). Alongside this growth, those funding HE (governments and students themselves) are increasingly scrutinising the processes and outcomes of university-level study, particularly where student satisfaction and value-for-money are concerned (Neeves and Hillman, 2017). The student experience, however, is much broader than satisfaction and value-for-money and there is increasing interest in the more personal and developmental aspects of

going to university. This interest covers the whole student journey: from thinking about, transitioning to, attending and graduating from university to subsequent employment and career development. It also encompasses those who do not complete the student journey, i.e. those who drop out.

Nursing has been fully integrated into the UK HE sector for almost 30 years and during this time it has made a significant contribution to participation growth, especially in female and 'non-traditional' entrants. Groups who struggle with university life are well-represented in UK nursing programmes: nursing degrees have significant proportions of mature students (Universities UK, 2014); typically 25% of students

studying nursing and other subjects allied to medicine live at home (HEFCE, 2009); and more than 20% of nursing students come from neighbourhoods with low university participation rates (Health Education England, 2014). In addition, the UK Nursing and Midwifery Council's requirements that nursing students undergo work-like clinical placements and an extended academic year means that nursing students are an apt group in which to explore the transition from school or college (or indeed work) to university.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Student Transition in General

The international literature has largely conceptualised the transition from school or college to university-level study as a process of adjustment to both the social and academic demands of university life. Successful transition to university increases the likelihood of graduation; conversely, the risk of drop out increases when students fail to transition successfully. Indeed, Tinto (1993, 2012) has developed an explanatory model of student retention that identifies the principal driver of student drop out as a failure to adjust to either the social or academic demands of university life. Research on student transition has identified a number of interrelated factors influencing this adjustment process, notably: the **expectations** of students, academic staff and parents (Smith, 2004; Yorke and Longden, 2008; Palmer et al., 2009; James et al., 2010; Briggs et al., 2012; McEwan, 2015; Neeves and Hillman, 2017); the degree to which students are **prepared** for university-level study (Harvey et al., 2006; James et al., 2010; Briggs et al., 2012; HEPI/Unite Students, 2017); and a sense of 'fitting in' or **belongingness** (Harvey et al., 2006; Palmer et al., 2009; HEPI/Unite Students, 2017).

Expectations can be over- or under-estimated and pertain to the social as well as academic demands of university life. For example, Harvey et al. (2006) found that first-year students tended to overrate their academic knowledge and abilities. More recently, the UK Student Academic Experience Survey (Neeves and Hillman, 2017) found matched expectations for only 9% of students, with 25% saying their experiences at university were better than expected and 13% saying they were worse. Socially, Palmer et al. (2009) report that students learn the 'rites of passage into studenthood' long before they enter university via stereotypical images of university life such as drinking, parties and staying in bed in the morning. These images temper their expectations and may also influence the extent to which students feel they fit in or belong.

Preparedness is integrally linked to student satisfaction (Harvey et al., 2006). While often interpreted as preparing students for academic study via study or learning skills development, preparedness also incorporates informed choices (including about the institution or degree), realistic expectations and motivation. It may also include raising aspirations for those for who would not normally consider university (Briggs et al., 2012).

Belongingness can refer to fitting in with the institution itself or more widely fitting in with peers. Regarding the former, Harvey et al. (2006) argue that students fit in more quickly if they understand and learn the institution's rules, processes and 'discourse'. These tend to be dealt with during induction but a criticism is that induction is too often a one-off rather than gradual or phased process (Harvey et al., 2006; Briggs et al., 2012).

Research also points to certain student groups that have particular difficulty with transitions. These include: 'first-in-family' students (often from low socioeconomic groups or low participation neighbourhoods); mature students; black and minority ethnic students; live-at-home or 'commuter' students; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) students; and disabled students (Richardson, 1995; Harvey et al., 2006; Yorke and Longden, 2008; Briggs et al., 2012; HEPI/Unite Students, 2017). Many of these groups have more difficulties than

others when fitting in with peers. First-in-family students often have less peer support to draw on and mature students are more likely to be socially isolated and have financial and family concerns (Harvey et al., 2006). Live-at-home students tend to find making friends more difficult (Yorke and Longden, 2008) since they lack the social opportunities of campus-based students (HEPI/Unite Students, 2017). LGBT students and students from lower socioeconomic groups feel less prepared when it comes to making friends (HEPI/Unite Students, 2017). As noted earlier, these groups are well-represented in the UK nursing student population.

2.2. Nursing Student Transition

For nursing students in particular, the international literature is limited both in quantity and quality. Most of the research is small-scale and qualitative, often limited to a single nursing programme or nursing school. However, what is available similarly identifies **expectations**, **preparedness** and **belongingness** as themes. Given the practice-based nature of nursing, it is unsurprising to find these themes traversing the clinical and professional aspects of nursing programmes as well as academic and social aspects.

Regarding expectations, O'Brien et al. (2008), in an Irish study, found nursing students were surprised by the course content and mode of delivery. Thalluri and King (2009) and Birks et al. (2013) identified significant gaps between expectations and perceptions among Australian nursing students, with Birks et al. identifying the 'initial shock of study' as a key theme. Andrew et al. (2009) reported unclear expectations of students' first placements in Scotland, and expectations about both theory and practice was one of five themes emerging from a recent study of English nursing students (Porteous and Machin, 2018).

In terms of preparedness, Fergy et al. (2011) devised and evaluated a specific model of support for nursing students at an English university, finding that it did help prepare students for the social, academic and professional aspects of nursing as intended. Thalluri and King (2009) reported a lack of academic preparedness among Australian distance learning nursing students in particular. O'Brien et al. (2008) and Gale et al. (2015) identified clinical skills sessions as essential preparation for clinical placements in Ireland and England, respectively.

Belongingness encompasses not only a sense of belonging to the university and nursing course but also to the profession and the healthcare organisations providing clinical placements (Levett-Jones et al., 2007; Andrew et al., 2009; O'Brien et al., 2008; Andrew et al., 2011; Fergy et al., 2011; Porteous and Machin, 2018). Belongingness was often associated with 'community', e.g. a learning community (Thalluri and King, 2009) or a community that embraces both theory and practice (Andrew et al., 2011) or a community of practice (Birks et al., 2013; Porteous and Machin, 2018). Levett-Jones et al. (2007) and Taylor (2012) specifically link belongingness and community with the notion of social capital.

In several papers (Thalluri and King, 2009; Fergy et al., 2011; Taylor, 2012; Ooms et al., 2012) expectations, preparedness and belongingness are incorporated into a general theme of **social and academic integration**. This is often with reference to Tinto's model of student retention, an unsurprising association given that nursing has relatively high student dropout rates worldwide (Pryjmachuk et al., 2009).

An important, additional theme in the nursing literature is the **balance between home, work and study** (Thalluri and King, 2009; Birks et al., 2013; Gale et al., 2015; Porteous and Machin, 2018). Regular clinical placements mean that nursing students not only have to adjust to the academic and social demands of university life but also the workplace because, although primarily learning experiences, clinical placements have many features of paid work. Moreover, given the many mature and female students studying nursing, childcare and family demands can affect nursing students more than others (Pryjmachuk and Richards, 2007).

3. Study Aims

To explore first year nursing students' experiences of transition to university, to compare their experiences with other disciplines and identify ways of easing transition for this group.

4. Methods

4.1. Participants and Procedure

As part of an online study skills module, first year nursing students at a UK university submitted a 500-word, formative, non-graded reflection on the transition from school, college or work to university. One author (SP) devised the study skills module and two authors (SP and BH) delivered it. The assignment was designed to give the students a chance to practise their reflective skills using a recent significant event common to all of them: starting university. The students were encouraged to use one of the reflective models they had been exposed to during the module to help them write the reflection. They were asked to think about the differences they noticed between school, college or work and university, the challenges they faced and the things that had gone well since starting university. If the student had been to university before, they were asked to think about the differences between their nursing course and the course they did before. At the time of submission (some 8–12 weeks into the course) most had not had a clinical placement. 161 out of 433 students indicated, via an online checkbox, agreement for their reflection to be analysed. The 161 reflections were downloaded from the virtual learning environment used for the online course. We were permitted by the university ethics committee to use only an anonymised dataset thus we removed all identifying data from the download, entering only the text of each reflection into qualitative research software *NVivo* before securely deleting the original download.

Although the data were anonymised, many students volunteered descriptive characteristics about themselves in their reflections, e.g. stating they were a mature student, or from a particular ethnicity, or explaining what qualifications or job they had or the type of school or college they went to before coming into nursing.

4.2. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted by CM and JG, who were independent of the study skills module team. To familiarise themselves with the data, CM and JG separately examined all of the reflections. During this familiarisation stage, it became apparent that around 50 reflections (circa 25,000 words of data) would provide sufficient 'information power' (Malterud et al., 2016). Thus, 50 reflections were analysed: 42 reflections randomly selected from the available 161 and a purposive sample of eight that had the potential to show particularly unique transition insights. These eight included five reflections from students who had entered with a vocational health and social care qualification and three from students describing a predominantly negative first semester experience. Thematic content analysis was conducted according to the principles of Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) with CM and JG independently analysing the data, comparing analyses and agreeing upon interpretations. Negative cases and rival explanations that emerged were explored and discussed by the wider research team.

4.3. Cohort Checking

An anonymised dataset meant we were unable to check the credibility of our findings with our actual participants. We thus adopted an amended version of member checking (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). We invited several students ($n = 5$) from the original first-year cohort (now in their third year), regardless of whether they provided a reflection for the study or not, to attend a 'cohort checking' focus group. In this focus group, we presented our results and asked the students to validate (or not, as the case may be) our initial findings.

5. Results

5.1. Participant Demographics

Despite having no formal demographic information, the reflections provided some insights. The majority ($n = 30$) indicated they were 'traditional' students, i.e. had come straight to university from school or college. Eighteen self-identified as mature students; of these, eight had already completed a previous degree (most commonly in Psychology) and one a postgraduate research degree. Seven had undertaken an Access to Higher Education course.

Twenty-two participants stated they had moved away from home to start their nursing degree; 16 were still living at home, with the remainder's living status unknown. Typically, it was traditional students who moved away from home and mature students who did not.

The nursing specialty (field) being pursued was harder to discern; five reported studying Mental Health Nursing, one Children's Nursing and 14 could reasonably be assumed to be studying Adult Nursing. The remainder did not volunteer a speciality.

5.2. Thematic Analysis

Two principal themes emerged from the data: **managing expectations** and **practical tools and support aids**. The former was an overarching theme, permeating most of the students' reflections, while the latter concerned practical, concrete actions that the university offered, or the students developed themselves, to ease transition.

5.2.1. Managing Expectations

While students reported many similar experiences (e.g. living independently, balancing workloads, learning to write academically), their reactions, responses and expectations were affected by prior experience. Expectations impacted transitions in three domains: academic experiences, support networks and personal development.

5.2.1.1. Academic Experiences. Academically, many students found the first semester challenging, leaving some questioning their capability. For most, this was not about nursing per-se, but their ability to understand the underlying scientific principles of nursing:

'…my knowledge of anatomy and physiology is not as in depth as those who have a biology A level which makes it difficult for me to understand the science side of the course.'

Few however felt they lacked an overall capability to complete the course, and those who were most confident had useful prior experience and knowledge:

'I know a wealth of people who have already completed a [nursing] degree, some of whom graduated from [study site] university. Because of this I was able to gather advice on the course and course content, and to an extent prepare myself.'

'I already have some knowledge in the microbiology lectures, in the areas of infection control and prevention, this is due to the [pre-course] placement experience I have in hospitals.'

For others, having to adjust to a higher level of work than anticipated was difficult:

'It has definitely been one of the most overwhelming periods of my life. Adjusting to the university environment and the new learning techniques…'

An important issue that emerged, especially from those who had already completed a degree, was the difference between nursing and other university courses. These students spoke about nursing as a

vocational course with a clear professional path which made their transition easier:

'I applied for adult nursing because…I feel I will be more focussed and disciplined than in my first university experience – I am working towards an end goal that I can visualise and strive towards.'

Second-time degree students reported that the course was more structured than other degrees and their timetables fuller. While some were not prepared for this intensity, others appreciated the wider range of teaching approaches:

'Learning on my last degree was mostly lecture based, and I have found that the seminars, peer-assisted study group meetings and contacts with my academic advisor have much improved my experience and progression on [this] course.'

5.2.1.2. Support Networks. A good support network, both social and academic, played a large part in assisting transition. Regarding social support, many students expected to feel alone, unsupported or homesick, fears that were largely unsubstantiated: 'the inevitable homesickness that I expected to experience never manifested itself'.

This expectation was present in both traditional and mature students, although for traditional students the expectation was finding friends in halls of residence, and for mature students, making course friends. Most had no difficulty however and met a diverse range of people on the course or in their accommodation. Social support was perhaps wider than they expected. They enjoyed learning about different cultures, and interacting with people they would not normally meet. One reported being 'thankful for the privilege to sit among my inspiring fellow classmates each day', while another detailed:

'I have been surrounded by more cultures in my few months here than I have been in my entire life. The diversity of backgrounds here has enriched my general knowledge, tasting new cuisines and learning about different festivals and religions…because everybody is so different, I feel that I can be more confident in myself and can try new things.'

Many students placed great emphasis on the positive, transition-enhancing effect friendships can have. This was true of both traditional and mature students, although mature students reported it taking longer to find friends in similar circumstances:

'I could see friendships forming between everyone which only added to my anxiety due to not meeting anyone…students were living in halls of residence which would develop their friendships further…I have a house and my own family that I was going home to every night…I still had not met anyone with the same life circumstances as myself, until I randomly bumped into two girls… [who] had a similar background to myself. I felt the anxiety wash off me…'

Some students recognised that difficulty forming friendships was a normal part of transitioning to university and were able to deal better with the uncertainty:

'[making friends] worried me a lot to begin with but knowing that I wasn't the only individual in this position enabled me to overcome this worry.'

Expectations of academic support provision by university staff was influenced by where students had come from. Second-time degree students found the level of academic support far higher. One noted that 'the lecturers, seminar leads and my academic advisor seem more approachable and caring than in my previous degree' while another stated that there was 'much more direct student support'. On the other hand, those students who had come from school or college commented that they were 'spoon fed' at school or college, with college tutors providing resources, reminding them about deadlines and keeping them on track:

'A major difference between moving from college to university is,

how I was made to take full responsibility for my studying and patterns of studying…At college I got full support from tutors and reminders of dates when a piece work was due whereas in university I have to keep up with all the dates as it has now become my responsibility.'

5.2.1.3. Personal Development. Many students saw a connection between the independent learning expected of university students and personal development; students' expectations of independent learning affected their transition. Second-time degree students understood independent learning (self-directed reading, literature searching and essay writing, for example) because prior experience taught them what to expect. For those that had come from school or college it was a bigger change, and did not always come naturally:

'It has become apparent how personally responsible we are…I now have full understanding just how critical it is to be totally committed to learning. This is extremely different from…a college environment.'

Independence was cited not just in relation to academic work, but life in general. Interestingly, this was an area where students *had* expected to be independent:

'Although this has been a steep learning curve, it couldn't have come at a better time. It has given me the opportunity to become an adult and be self-sufficient.'

Students recognised the challenges they had faced and appeared to have developed in the process. One remarked that 'many of the challenges have actually helped me to develop'. For others (often the mature students), experiencing great personal hardships in life before university made them stronger and fuelled their desire to become a nurse:

'…life skills and knowledge, such as resilience and pragmatism and the importance [of] dignity in care and dying. All these skills are invaluable for becoming a nurse.'

Students who reflected on previous experiences tended to transition well. Several mature students felt they had developed interpersonal skills and maturity through dealing with personal issues or trauma. Students who had worked as a health care assistant or similar also transitioned easier:

'Working as a Mental Health Support Worker has made me a mature [i.e. responsible] student through the experiences I developed when providing care to a wide range of people.'

Previous college or university experience equipped students with note taking and revision skills, although many experimented with different techniques to find one that worked for them. Several commented that good time management and planning skills prepared them for the nursing course:

'I went in to this course knowing that it would be difficult, and felt more prepared to work harder than I did last time at university'.

Some argued that time out of education was positive because it could instil hunger to learn:

'I believe it further sparked my hunger to be a nurse and return to higher education. I feel that if had begun the [nursing degree] course straight after completing my BA degree, I would not be as eager or enthusiastic as I am today.'

Access to Higher Education courses prepared students for both returning to education, and the actual course content:

'I think I would have struggled a lot more…had I not gone to college last year to do an access course…which included biology and sociology…learning how to write an essay and referencing and citing'.

5.2.2. Practical Tools and Support Aids

Underpinning this second theme were existing university initiatives students found useful, and skills and techniques learnt independently.

Students really valued 'transition enhancing strategies' such as seminar groups, enquiry-based learning (EBL) sessions, peer-assisted student support (PASS) sessions and the practical skills elements of the degree. They also valued extra online resources, and podcast lectures and virtual learning guides (e.g. on referencing). Formative assessments were considered useful for testing knowledge and practising writing skills.

While the university provided some of the infrastructure for easing transition, most techniques and skills were learned independently. As with expectations, these skills fell into the academic, social and personal domains.

Academically, many students reported skills to aid comprehension and retention: flash cards, going over slides before or after the lectures and extra reading. Extra reading was challenging for some, but others found it beneficial because they could choose a topic to research. For many the standout experience was learning to take notes effectively. Many reported that they modified and experimented with multiple note taking styles, learning by experience.

'…I had not been in a classroom for a long time so I had to trial a few methods of note taking before I found what suited me best.'

'…another challenge for me was trying to find a note taking technique that would suit me…Everyone has their own preferred way of learning, and thanks to the University I have found mine too.'

Other skills students developed independently were critical thinking skills, how to be an independent learner and techniques to plan and manage their time. Some students set up group revisions sessions with friends:

'Me and a few fellow nursing students have set up a group revision session once a week whereby we discuss the topics of the week and explain to one another anything we don't understand…'

Social skills included enhanced communication skills, learned through socialising with different cultures and their peers. It helped to recognise that they were all in the same boat: 'I need not have worried, everybody I realised were [sic] feeling the same'. They reported that friendships were crucial for getting the most out of the course.

Finally, in the personal domain, students highlighted specific attitudes they had developed. Second-time degree students felt very 'focused and ready' this time round. Others struggled with anxiety but talked about how they had learnt how to overcome it by relaxing and 'taking one step at a time' or rationalising their homesickness:

'Even though it has been a challenge…missing home and friends, the best thing to do is remember that you are studying for a degree you are passionate about'.

6. Discussion

Earlier, we identified three key themes in the general transitions literature: expectations, belongingness and preparedness. The literature on nursing students in particular suggested that belongingness is multi-dimensional since it incorporates membership of several interlinked communities: academic and placement learning communities; social communities based on course peers, accommodation setup or sports and leisure interests; and the professional community of nursing.

Our findings are largely consistent with this literature. Our two intertwined themes are expectations and support mechanisms (provided either by the institution or self-determined), both of which underpin preparedness. Cross-cutting these two themes are the academic,

social and personal domains. The first two domains clearly relate to previous observations (e.g. Harvey et al., 2006; Briggs et al., 2012; Taylor, 2012), often in the context of Tinto's model of student retention, that academic and social integration are key to a successful transition.

Integrating academically generally created more anxieties than integrating socially though there were differences between certain groups. Mature students with previous degrees tended to fare better at transitioning to the academic aspects of university, while first-time mature students and younger traditional students tended to struggle. In particular, younger students straight from school or college (where support tended to be paternalistic and intense) struggled with the independent learning approaches of university-level study. This is consistent with finding of O'Shea (2003) that mature nursing students are more self-directed in learning than younger students.

Regarding social integration, while not explicit, a sense of belongingness and community permeated several of the subthemes, most notably in relation to peer support and friendships. Younger students had few problems integrating socially; it was mature students who tended to have the difficulties here, perhaps because they were often live-at-home students with domestic and childcare responsibilities on top of their course obligations. As we reported earlier in the literature review, mature students are more likely to be socially isolated and have financial and family concerns and live-at-home students tend to find making friends more difficult since they lack the social opportunities of campus-based students.

Our findings also imply that the transition process can enhance personal development and while a personal domain has been discussed elsewhere in both the general (Trautwein and Bosse, 2017) and nursing (Gale et al., 2015) transitions literature, it features much less frequently than discussions pertaining to the academic and social domains. Since modern, professional nursing demands insight and reflection, it could be argued that finding that the transition experience can enhance personal development is unsurprising when compared with university students in general. It is perhaps surprising that it does not feature strongly in the nursing transitions literature. Many second-time degree students noted in their accounts that nursing degrees were different to other degrees and many implied that the transition was to the profession of nursing and not just to a university course, a point noted elsewhere in the literature (e.g. Andrew et al., 2009; Andrew et al., 2011; Fergy et al., 2011; Taylor, 2012; Porteous and Machin, 2018). This may explain why those students who had worked or volunteered in a health- or nursing-related environment prior to entry seemed to find transitioning easier.

6.1. Easing the Transition

In terms of easing the transition to university for nursing students, our findings suggest that the focus should be on managing expectations and providing direct support. While this is a recommendation that could apply equally to all university students, our findings suggest that, for nursing students, the management of expectations and provision of support should also have a personal dimension and that any support measures should take advantage of student resourcefulness.

The management of student expectations is critical to a good transition experience. Since the alignment of expectations (between staff and student) is important (McEwan, 2015) and expectations are a driver in understanding value-for-money (Neeves and Hillman, 2017), nursing departments should consider how expectations across all three domains can be aligned. In the academic domain, providing taster session to potential students might help with their expectations. Similarly, students might be helped by the release of sample second-year materials during their first year. In the social and personal domains, the sharing of student transition stories (such as the reflections our participants wrote) can help students realise they will not be alone in having anxieties about making friends or having the capability to complete the course. Taylor (2012), using the lens of social capital to view nursing

student transition, suggests that 'connections' across four areas – people, the classroom, practice (clinical placements) and the profession – can enhance the social and personal aspects of transition. Widening expectations to include all four of these areas could help here.

Regarding the provision of formal support across the three domains, nursing departments should avoid the tendency to focus on deficiencies and focus more on students' individual learning needs and how to build upon their strengths (Harvey et al., 2006). A strengths-based approach is important because, as we too found, the first year experience is a largely positive one (Gale et al., 2015; Yorke and Longden, 2008) and students tend to be excited by what lies ahead (HEPI/Unite Students, 2017). As our findings, and those of Clark (2005) and Porteous and Machin (2018) indicate, students can also be resourceful when faced with challenges, discovering their own solutions and overcoming fears and anxieties without formal support. Indeed, Porteous & Machin frame this resourcefulness in terms of self-efficacy and resilience, concepts that have close affinity with a worldview focussing on strengths rather than deficits. Moreover, using transition as a means to explore why students stay and succeed rather than why they leave reflects a theoretical shift towards strengths in the literature, most evident in Tinto's more recent work where he focuses on success (*Completing College*; Tinto, 2012) rather than failure (*Leaving College*; Tinto, 1993).

Support activities are often associated with first-term induction. Yet induction activities should be continual and not one-off (Harvey et al., 2006; Briggs & Clark 2012). Consequently, in the academic domain, this might mean study or research skills development being threaded through the curriculum rather than as standalone first-term activities. Differentiated teaching approaches, so that students can go at their own speed, could also help students adapt more gradually to independent learning (HEPI/Unite Students, 2017). In the social domain, it might mean social activities are scheduled throughout the academic year and not just in welcome (freshers') weeks, with different social activities being devised for specific groups including those that might struggle to socialise. In the personal domain, it might mean opportunities are provided for students to use their strengths to develop themselves or others, e.g. through activities such as volunteering, mentoring or peer-assisted learning (e.g. PASS).

It is also important that support initiatives are monitored for quality once implemented. For example, while there is literature supporting the efficacy of peer tutoring and peer-assisted study schemes (Dawson et al., 2014; Topping, 1996) and our student accounts were largely positive about PASS, our cohort check revealed there was variation in how PASS was implemented and some students got little, if anything, from it.

6.2. Strengths and Limitations of the Study

One of the strengths of the study is that a reasonably short, written reflection can be a good data source when studying student transitions that could be used in almost every university discipline. While reflective techniques have been used to generate data in transition research in nursing (Porteous and Machin, 2018) and in other disciplines (Palmer et al., 2009; Trautwein and Bosse, 2017), they are rare when compared to techniques such as surveys and individual or group interviews. The fact that information power was reached after reading around 50 reflections also indicates that the method was a good way of capturing key transition experiences.

The majority of our findings (the value of PASS being the only exception) were validated via our cohort check. While cohort checking was used out of necessity (because our dataset was anonymous), it proved to be a useful alternative to member checking that we would encourage other researchers to consider.

The study is limited by the self-selection of participants; we cannot be sure that we have not missed important information about the transition experience from the majority of students who chose not to allow their reflection to be used in this research or that those students

may, indeed, have had different experiences. The study is also limited by the timing of the written reflections. The students were 8–12 weeks into the course, undertaking mainly theoretical elements of the course. It could be that other issues would have arisen later in the first year, particularly when they had started clinical placements. The study is also limited by the (not unreasonable) constraints imposed on it by the university ethics committee in relation to a pre-existing dataset not specifically designed to be researched. This meant that useful demographic data about the students that would have enabled formal comparisons to be made were not available.

7. Conclusion

We found that, in many respects, nursing students' transition experiences are similar to those of other university students. However, the particular demographics of nursing student cohorts – most notably the significant numbers of mature and second-degree students – amplifies certain aspects of the transition experience. Thus, nursing student cohorts often contain a disproportionate number of students more likely to struggle with transition but also high numbers of students who embrace the developmental aspects of going to university. This could explain both the problems with retention seen is many nursing courses and the emergence of a personal development theme from our data.

Nursing students do understand that they as well as the institution have a role to play in the transition experience. This fits with observations made about university students in general, e.g. Clark (2005) notes that transition is built by students and does not just happen and James et al. (2010) describe higher education as a 'jointly produced enterprise in which students actively contribute to the outcomes' (p. 6). To a large extent, we found that students see the institutional role as one facilitating them to find their own resources when transitioning, a perspective that clearly fits with the notion of independent learning. As Harvey et al. (2006) remark, it is not necessarily that students do not understand the principles of independent learning rather it is that they need help in becoming independent.

If the transition is to be eased, nursing departments need to understand that transition is a process rather than one-off event, a process which involves a joint enterprise between students and university staff especially in terms of expectations and the support provided, and which cuts across academic, social and personal dimensions.

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