Why are student transitions important?

Students come from different places…
- High school
- College
- Another country and culture
- Working
- Training in a profession
- Previous degree
- Time out of education
- A caring role

Every day, they come from different places…
- Living locally
- University residence
- Private accommodation
- Commuting from out of town
- Working online from near or far
- Their part-time job or caring role

They are going to different places…
- More advanced study (here or elsewhere)
- A full-time job or entering a profession
- Changing or advancing their career
- To another country and culture
- New life experiences: parenting, travelling

They face challenges...
- New places, systems, cultures, knowledge, expectations
- Challenges to confidence
- Juggling study, work, family, planning a career
- Sometimes as a result of different backgrounds and experiences

What makes a student transition easier?

These key ingredients of successful transitions were identified in a review of 127 case studies and resources reporting on student experiences and transition-related activities across the University of Edinburgh.

1. **Clarity from staff**

   Students are inundated with information when they start a degree or course. At the same time valuable information is sometimes absent, or does not connect meaningfully with a student perspective. Help demystify transitions by providing exceptionally clear, candid, targeted information.

   **Action**: Review the information that you provide to new students, considering critically how it might be understood by students from a variety of backgrounds. Ask existing students for input: what would they have wanted to know?

   **Example**: Experienced veterinary students created a resource and support package that helped new students know what to expect, as well as providing discipline-specific knowledge based on gaps between school and university curricula – [http://edin.ac/2oYjrNI](http://edin.ac/2oYjrNI)

2. **Early preparation**

   A simple way to help with transitions is to see them coming well in advance. When students know what to expect from transition like starting university, becoming a researcher, or studying abroad, they will be better prepared to handle them – and they’ll feel less alone if it’s difficult.

   **Action**: Think about where students come from before they start your programme or course. Consider contacting them in advance – online or through an in-person meeting – to provide clarity about the upcoming challenge, and a friendly contact point for questions.

   **Example**: The Making Transitions Personal framework uses pre-arrival questionnaires to help students articulate their motivations, aspirations and expectations for university. This forms a basis for the first personal tutor meeting – [http://edin.ac/2oYKMiP](http://edin.ac/2oYKMiP)

3. **Peer support**

   Students have a great capacity to support and empower other students, because they share – or have recently overcome – similar challenges. When more experienced students tell stories of their struggles and success, new students understand that they are not alone. They can also learn specific strategies, skills, and knowledge relevant to their subject area.

   **Quick action:**
   - Arrange for new students in your area to meet existing students
   - Highlight peer learning and support activities at the Students’ Association – [http://edin.ac/2ooKEp5](http://edin.ac/2ooKEp5)

   **Systemic action**: Set up an ongoing mentorship scheme for your programme or subject area, empowering and training existing students to meet regularly with new students. Involve students as much as possible in running the programme. Contact the Students’ Association for further information and to find existing programmes – [http://edin.ac/2qicTHl](http://edin.ac/2qicTHl)

   **Example**: Many subject areas have Peer Assisted Learning Schemes (PALS) that recruit and train students to lead support sessions and develop resources. This creates a community rather than simply support for individuals (e.g. VetPALS – [http://edin.ac/2pcRRgy](http://edin.ac/2pcRRgy)).
Belonging and community
When students come to university or embark on a new programme, they lose the familiarity of previous places, systems, cultures, knowledge and expectations. They may feel isolated and invisible. Students can gain a new sense of stability and belonging if they are welcomed into a community. They may also be more likely to ask for help, and to make the most of opportunities.

Quick action:
- Be aware that students in new circumstances may feel isolated
- Introduce students to existing communities in your School

Systemic action: Think and ask critically about whether students in your area feel part of a community. Create a new event for students that runs regularly and includes a mix of new and existing students and staff. Support students who want to do something similar.

Example: The School of Biomedical Sciences runs an Academic Families scheme in which small groups of first year students meet regularly, led by later year volunteers. This local community is a source of both academic and pastoral support – http://edin.ac/2q99AB7

Confidence
Confidence can be fragile at points of transition. Nurturing confidence makes transitions easier, and simple acts of reassurance are valued by students. Students also gain confidence in their ability when they have the opportunity to demonstrate newly learned skills.

Quick action: Encourage students to be explicit about their hopes and worries, and recognise cases in which simple reassurances will go a long way.

Systemic action: Identify the skills – such as essay writing or critical thinking – that help students succeed in your area. Organise friendly, low-pressure opportunities within courses for students to demonstrate these skills to themselves and others.

Example: The School of Biological Sciences ran a session in which first year students practised scientific writing and assessed peers’ writing in a low-pressure environment that allowed them to build confidence – http://tinyurl.com/kwzppee9

Role of responsibility
Being entrusted with a role of responsibility – such as student mentor, class representative, student residence assistant, society management, or an internship – is a powerful way for students to gain confidence, self-efficacy, and membership of a community. Such roles also develop transferable skills, employability, and further opportunities.

Quick action: Encourage students you know to pursue roles of responsibility in their areas of interest, even – and especially – if they don’t feel such roles are “for them”.

Systemic action: Create opportunities in your area for students to take on roles of responsibility. Consider providing training and/or payment: this shows that you take the student’s role seriously. Distribute such opportunities fairly, not just to those who already see themselves as leaders, because such roles generate further opportunities.

Example: Student Leaders are major beneficiaries of the Careers Service, the Student Disability Service, Student Counselling, Widening Participation and many others including English as a second language; students who have spent time in care; and students with caring roles.

Recognition of diversity
All students come to transitions with a unique set of circumstances. However, some students may face more challenges than others. These may include students from low socio-economic status backgrounds; students from different ethnic groups; LGBT+ students; disabled students; students with English as a second language; students who have spent time in care; and students with caring roles.

Quick action: Raise awareness of Students’ Association groups and societies where students can meet others facing similar challenges (http://edin.ac/2pgL3xK, e.g. Student Parents and Carers group).

Systemic action: Many students face extra challenges. Try to provide support that anticipates a wide range of student backgrounds and experiences.

Example: Students from low socio-economic status backgrounds can struggle more with confidence and feeling out of place: they may be the first in their family to attend university. They may also have a greater need to work part-time or commute from home – http://edin.ac/2q04Xeu

Drawing on existing support
There are a huge range of existing support services at the university, but students may be unsure where to find them – or may be unaware of these services, or are unsure about using them – only to find later on that they would have been invaluable.

Action: Develop your own awareness of the support services at the university and whether they are accessed by students in your area. Direct students to these services when appropriate, to provide reassurance, and help normalise the act of seeking support.

Example: Support services are provided by the Students’ Association, the Institute for Academic Development (IAD), the Careers Service, the Student Disability Service, Student Counselling, Widening Participation and many others including local Schools and subject areas – http://edin.ac/1TSZrjg

Key resources:
Edinburgh University Students’ Association – www.eusa.ed.ac.uk
Supporting Students guide for staff – http://edin.ac/2pgObKI
Academic Transitions Toolkit, for practical downloadable resources – http://edin.ac/2dmvzP8

Resilience
Many students struggle with a transition – such as adjusting to university-style learning – and feel like they are “not good enough”. This is common even for students who are used to being high achievers. Resilience is important for students to cope with such feelings and struggles, and it’s not an extraordinary trait – staff can help students to develop resilience.

Action: Help nurture resilience by anticipating feelings of inadequacy and normalising these struggles so that students do not hide away. Show how mistakes, getting “stuck”, and asking for help are part of successful learning.

Example: Induction sessions for first year maths students include group-based activities that specifically acknowledge and discuss struggles adjusting to university-level maths and how they can be overcome – http://edin.ac/2q999G

Reflection
Acts of reflection can help students through a transition, because they provide the time and space for students to articulate their hopes and worries, emerging interests, strengths, and struggles. Reflections can help students speak openly with mentors, take action towards goals, and talk confidently about their abilities.

Action: When your students are going through an important transition, arrange time and space for them to reflect – this can be before, during, or after a transition. Reflections can be for students alone; they can connect students with their personal tutors; or they can form part of assessment.

Example: EUSA’s Open Badges initiative encourages class and School representatives to reflect on their experiences and skills in a blog post to develop an awareness of what they have learned; this also benefits their employability – http://edin.ac/2pgFK1A