

Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Hayman, Rick, Coyles, Andrew and Allin, Linda (2021) The Profile of Higher Education Sport Students in England: Implications for Successful Transition and Effective Teaching and Learning Practice. *Innovative Practice in Higher Education*, 4 (2). pp. 134-152. ISSN 2044-3315

Published by: Staffordshire University

URL: <http://journals.staffs.ac.uk/index.php/ipihe/article...>
<<http://journals.staffs.ac.uk/index.php/ipihe/article/view/206>>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/44013/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)

The Profile of Higher Education Sport Students in England: Implications for Successful Transition and Effective Teaching and Learning Practice

Rick Hayman, Andy Coyles and Linda Allin

Northumbria University, United Kingdom.

Corresponding author: rick.hayman@northumbria.ac.uk

Abstract

Limited studies have explored sport students experiences of transitioning into university, which is surprising considering the high annual numbers recruited to English Higher Education (HE) sport programmes. The primary study aim was to gain specific insight into the expectations, motivations, anticipated challenges and concerns of first year sport degree students who had recently enrolled at an English post 1992 university. Three hundred and thirty-four participants completed a 23-question survey, with key findings outlining the profile of students. Most notably, this indicated a high frequency of vocational entry qualifications, the dominance of expectations around employability and a general lack in confidence to successfully integrate, both socially and academically. Strategies and recommendations to inform future curriculum reform which best support the social and academic needs of modern day HE sports students are presented, as are limitations and avenues for future research.

Keywords: Higher Education; Sport Students; University Transition.

Introduction

HE is universally recognised throughout society for the role it can play in positively shaping life satisfaction, personal development and prosperity (O`Shea, Stone, Delahunty & May, 2018; Stivastra, Tamir, McGonigal, John & Gross, 2009). Globally over the last three decades, there has been unprecedented growth in numbers entering the HE sector. To illustrate, the proportion of the United Kingdom (UK) population with an undergraduate degree is high by international standards (Knetta & McCartney, 2018), with over half of all school leavers in Scotland now progressing into HE (Tett, Cree & Christie, 2017). In England, application rates for 18-year-olds from widening participation backgrounds increased to the highest recorded levels in 2018 (Universities UK, 2018).

However, a downside of the rapidly expanding size and diversity of modern-day UK HE student populations is the numbers withdrawing from their studies within 12 months of enrolment (Berger, Blanco, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Tinto, 2012). This concern was further underlined by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (n.d.) which reported that more than 26,000 first year English undergraduate students who began their degree in 2015-2016 failed to progress beyond year one of their programme. Such statistics in the current economic climate are concerning for university leadership teams because of the substantial income losses and their social responsibility to supporting a successful transition for all their students (Beer & Lawson, 2017; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Haylek, 2007; Thomas, 2012).

Student Expectations and Motivations

Due to the UK government's categorising of students as 'customers' (Dearing, 1997) and introduction of tuition fees in the late 1990's, English HE institutions now have to operate under ever increased forces of marketisation (Bunce, Baird & Jones, 2017). This has especially been the case over the past two decades, with many students now adopting a consumer-based identity towards their university education (Balloo, Pauli & Worrell, 2017; Briggs, 2006; Kreig, 2013).

Research has clearly established how student engagement, attendance and achievement is more likely to be positive and longer-lasting when their expectations are met (Byrne, Flood, Hassall, Joyce & Montano, 2012; Lobo & Gurney, 2014; Voss et al., 2007). It is also well accepted that students are more likely to disengage, underachieve, fail and ultimately withdraw from their studies when such expectations are not fully addressed (Bennett, Kottasz & Nocciolino, 2007; Byrne et al., 2012; Leese, 2010). Research by Balloo (2018), Allin, Hayman and Coyles (2017) and Surgenor (2013) revealed how undergraduates expectations of academic staff were to be approachable, experts in the subject matter they teach and to provide frequent and high quality assessment support and guidance. Brinkworth et al., (2009) found that despite anticipating differences between high school and university life, incoming undergraduates expected frequent and immediate access to academic staff and for summative assessments to be marked promptly and returned with comprehensive feedback.

A significant research base has shown employability prospects, moving away from home, the development of new social networks and continuation of learning as being students' primary motives for entering HE. The study by Balloo et al., (2017) revealed career opportunities to be the most important reason for first year psychology undergraduates attending university. Byrne et al., (2012) compared the motives, expectations and preparedness of undergraduate accounting students from Ireland, UK, Spain and Greece.

Career focus and self-development were the most highly rated factors, indicating students were motivated to enter HE to improve their employment prospects, develop professionally and that they fully expected their studies to support their intellectual growth. Lowe and Cook (2003) surveyed over 600 incoming undergraduate students on their social and academic expectations of university life, with the majority entering HE to satisfy family and peer expectations and to lead active and fulfilling social lives.

Anticipated Challenges and Concerns

A successful transition from school into HE is reflective of students feeling they have settled promptly, confidently and happily, made new friends and developed a sense of belonging and identity with peers and academic personnel (Farhat et al., 2017; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Yet with expectations of university life not always matching actual experiences, many have found adjusting to social and academic demands to be both challenging and concerning (McMillan, 2013; Murtagh, 2012; Pillay & Ngcobo; 2010; Richardson, King, Garrett, & Wrench, 2012; Woosley, 2003).

To illustrate, Thomas (2012) found difficulties in socially integrating, such as homesickness and unable to make new friends, to be key factors for withdrawing from university. Such problems are exacerbated with the diversity of student profiles now attending university, of which many no longer leave home, but instead commute each day. Berger (1997) found friendships formed in halls of residences were important sources for a sense of community, with those not living in student accommodation more likely to feel marginalised. Wilcox et al., (2005) showed regular social support from peers and staff as being important for coping with feelings of isolation and loneliness. Part-time, mature and working-class students have also found it difficult making a successful transition into HE and have higher non-completion rates compared to those from more traditional backgrounds (Rubin, 2012; Tinto, 2010).

It is also proposed that growing number of students lack sufficient understanding of what HE level learning entails (Gamache, 2002; Lowe & Cook, 2003), and that many enter their studies feeling underprepared for the teaching, learning and assessment methods they are likely to encounter (Fahrat, Bingham, Caulfield & Grieve, 2017). A majority also find difficult the abrupt shift towards learning independently and generally have limited experience of learning collaboratively and communicating in front of large audiences (Hayman, 2017, 2018; Hockings et al., 2018; McMillan, 2013). Furthermore, Gill (2019) employed focus groups to explore the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of sports science students on their transition into higher education courses delivered within further education settings and found that many expected to face numerous academic and social barriers

including increased workloads, difficulty completing assessments to expected standards and failing to become more independent learners

Some evidence has shown how HE sports students engage more positively with constructivist learning approaches, especially where opportunities to discuss ideas, solve problems and to share and reflect upon personal experiences are regularly provided (Groves, Bowd & Smith, 2010; Hayman, 2017; Peters, Jones & Peters, 2008). For example, Hayman (2018) reported how flipped learning helped change a final-year undergraduate sports coaching module characterised by student disengagement, poor attendance and underperformance producing improvements in attendance, attitude, motivation to learn and achievement.

Study Aims and Rationale

Overall, research exploring undergraduate sport student experiences of transitioning into universities is limited, which is surprising taking into account the large and diverse cohorts recruited annually to UK HE sport programmes. This study arose in direct response to several years of high withdrawal rates across first year sport degree programmes at a particular English post 1992 university. The primary aim was to uncover the expectations, motivations, anticipated challenges and concerns of first year sports students who had recently enrolled at this institution. Findings will be used to ensure future teaching and learning strategies are most suitably aligned with the academic and social needs of newly arriving undergraduate sports students.

Methodology

Participants

In October 2016, all incoming first year undergraduate sport students were invited to participate in the study. Once institutional ethical clearance was granted, an initial recruitment email briefly outlining the study aims, objectives and procedures to follow, along with participant information sheet and consent form were communicated by the first author via the online Blackboard portal. Prior to data collection, consenting participants were informed how they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without providing any reasoning and assigned numbers to protect anonymity. In total, 334 of the 415 eligible participants completed the survey (80% cohort completion rate).

Design and Analysis

The study design employed a quantitative approach. Specifically, the survey structure was developed by the research team and informed by previous HE transitional studies (e.g., Allin et al., 2017) which had identified various

relatable variables and key demographics. The survey comprised 23 questions, including a mix of yes or no, Likert scale and multiple answer response questions. There were no correct or incorrect answers. It was piloted with three second year sport undergraduate students which established an approximate completion time of ten minutes, with all wording considered appropriate and understandable for a first-year undergraduate cohort. In the survey, participants provided responses to three separate sections addressing: (A) background demographic information including gender, age, ethnicity, previous study experience and qualifications (B) motivations for attending and expectations of their university experience (C) perceived challenges and concerns of university life. The sections comprised mainly closed questions which were designed to ensure prompt and simple completion. Participants were able to rate their expectations, motivations, challenges and concerns on a scale of one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree).

Procedure

Time was granted in teaching week five (mid October 2016) for participants to complete the survey in a generic sport module lecture delivered to all first-year sport programmes within the department. Participants were briefed to answer each section honestly and to leave any questions blank which they did not fully understand. All research team members attended the data collection session, distributed then collected completed hardcopies of surveys and responded to any participant queries.

Results

Demographics

The findings showed that of the 334 respondents, 248 (74%) were male and 86 (26%) were female. More specifically, 167 (50%) were from Sports Studies undergraduate programs comprising Sport Coaching, Sport Development with Coaching and Sport Management whilst 167 (50%) were from Sports Science undergraduate programs comprising Applied Sport and Exercise Science, Applied Sports Science with Coaching, and Sport and Exercise Nutrition.

From the overall sample, 293 students (88%) were aged 18-19, 29 (9%) were aged 20-21, 8 (2%) aged 22-25 and 3 (1%) aged between 26 and 34 years. Of the sample, 292 (87%) identified themselves as White British. The remaining 42 students (13%) identified themselves as either Asian, Black or British African, Asian British/Pakistani, Mixed White and Black African or Mixed White and Black Caribbean. One hundred and thirty-six students (41%) indicated they had a close family member, either their mother, father, sister or brother, who had successfully completed an undergraduate degree

education. Over half of the sample (59%) were the first in their immediate family to attend university.

Two hundred students (60%) entered university directly from school sixth form, with 126 (38%) coming from a college and 6 (2%) from other educational routes (2%). At the time of data collection, 225 (67%) were living in student accommodation with 109 (33%) residing at home and commuting into university daily. Most students (82%) cited multiple reasons (more than 3) for attending university. The main reason identified was that 'a degree was necessary for their chosen career pathway', with 'to gain subject knowledge' and 'personal development' the next highest responses.

For 303 students (91%), they were attending their preferred first choice destination of study. In total, 238 (71%) attended an open day at the institution, whilst 96 (29%) did not. Multiple reasons were cited as having positively influenced their open day experience. The most popular was 'university facilities', with 'regional social scene' and 'employability rates of courses' the next highest responses. Prior to their arrival at university, many students (85%) had experience of competing at varying standards (e.g., grassroots/community to semi-professional) across a range of team and individual sports, with football, athletics and netball most popular. Of all students, just under half (48%) intended to continue their sports participation by joining a university sports team.

Student Expectations and Motivations

Multiple reasons were identified by all 344 students for what they hoped to gain from their university experience. The main two reasons identified were employability and enhanced quality of later life (see Table 1).

Table 1: Student Motives for Attending University

What do you hope to gain from your university experience? (multiple responses permitted)	
Response	Student Agreement (n=334)
Employability	84%
Enhanced Quality of Later Life	71%
Expanding Subject Knowledge	69%
Friendships	68%
Personal Development	68%
Enjoyment	57%
Practical Experience	57%

Anticipated Challenges and Concerns

When questioned about their greatest anticipated challenge upon entering university, students provided more academic rather than social examples. The most prevalent responses for academic challenges were 'balancing studies with work and coaching commitments' and 'managing university workload'. Next were concerns with 'completing summative assessments to required academic standards', 'understanding subject area sufficiently', 'keeping up to date with work' and 'simultaneously managing multiple assessments'. For social challenges, the most popular answers were 'concerns with not fitting in', 'settling' and 'making friends'. Next came 'being away from family, friends and pets', followed by 'failure to become more independent'.

Students revealed their greatest concerns upon entering university to be social rather than academic. The most frequent were identified as 'not fitting in or making new friends', 'homesickness', 'getting to know the campus and city surroundings' and 'maintaining a suitable student and athlete life balance'. A small number of academic concerns were revealed, which included 'managing assessment workload', 'passing assessments' and 'course being too academically challenging'.

When surveys were completed, 291 students (87%) felt they had 'settled' since arriving at University, with 40 (12%) replying 'not yet settled' and 3 (1%) stating 'no'. Of the 291 who reported a positive transition, 242 (83%) felt they had made friends with at least one fellow student on their degree programme, 233 (77%) were happy with their course, 175 (60%) had positive first impressions of academic staff but only 114 (39%) had yet to join a university sports team.

'Not Yet Settled' Students

Of the 334 students, 40 (12%) identified as being 'not yet settled' and, of these, 85% were aged 18 or 19, 15% were non-white British, 48% were first generation and 63% attended school 6th Form. The majority (93%) entered from BTEC backgrounds, a vocationally based qualification with specific career focus enabling students to gain skills and knowledge in their subject area, then apply them in real-life and applied scenarios. For 85%, they were attending their first-choice destination to study. The primary reason for nearly half (43%) to attend university was to increase future employment opportunities, whilst 35% did not attend any open day event.

In total, 20% of students knew five or less fellow students enrolled at the university on arrival and 40% between six and ten. Furthermore, 38% were commuter students with 62% living in student accommodation. Interestingly, 80% were members of a grassroots sports team prior to their arrival at university, but only 40% were keen to join a university sports team. Their

greatest perceived university challenge was academic (unable to pass assessments) but greatest concern was social (not settling in)

Table 2: Comparison of 'Settled' and 'Not Yet Settled' Student Characteristics

Characteristic	Settled (n=294)	Not Yet Settled (n=40)
Aged 18-19	88%	85%
Non-White British	13%	15%
First Generation	59%	48%
Commuter Student	33%	38%
First Choice Destination	91%	85%
Open Day Attendance	71%	65%

Discussion

This study arose in direct response to several years of high withdrawal rates across first year sport degree programmes at an English post 1992 institution. The primary study aim was to determine the expectations, motivations, anticipated challenges and concerns of newly arrived first year university sport students and to provide future recommendations for effective teaching and learning practice. It also explored further the perception that undergraduate sport programmes now typically recruit a wide demographic of learners, including greater numbers from non-traditional, first generation and vocational backgrounds.

Students in this study were highly motivated to enter HE by 'employability and future career aspirations', with 84% agreeing with this as something they hoped to gain from their university experience. The next highest response on what they hoped to gain was 'to enhance quality of later life' (71%) and may suggest that from a student perspective these two may be related. That is, they may reflect the dominant belief that a university education will lead to an advantage in earnings potential and betterment over a person's life (Barkas et al., 2019; O`Shea, et al., 2018). These motives towards employability and the belief in a graduate earnings premium are similar to those of Hall et al., (2016) who examined the motives of sport coaching students across two large HE post 1992 institutions.

Embedding of employability into the curriculum is central for universities in matching student expectations. However, given that the transition to graduate level employment also rests on available opportunities in the job market, it is also important to ensure students are aware of and experience additional benefits of a university education. Whilst recent statistics suggest that the median salary for a graduate is still higher than a non-graduate, there are differences across degree subjects, gender and ethnicity (Britton et

al., 2016). Hall et al., (2016) also found their sport coaching students lacked a critical awareness around this and how graduate earnings may not be easily nor immediately attainable. It was reassuring to note that responses for 'subject knowledge' (69%) and 'personal development' (68%) also rated high in student's hopes. Only 17% of students hoped to gain cross cultural and international awareness through coming to university. This may simply be a lack of knowledge around the potential of such opportunities as studying abroad or that it remains a focus for a minority of students.

That 94% of those who attended an open day were positively influenced showed the value of these activities for prospective students. Results seemed to show that this highlighted the 'high-quality facilities' (e.g., teaching, campus, library, sport, accommodation) as well as the 'social scene' in the local area. A potential issue, however, was that 29% of students had not attended an open day prior to arriving at university. This raises questions as to how such students discover the full extent of opportunities available to them at university. It may be that this was gained through informal means and other students, through outreach events or the website. Further research would be needed to establish the extent to which university marketing and student engagement activities reached this subset of students, or what influenced their university expectations.

The cost of tuition fees as an influencer in the decision to attend university or not was mixed, with 38% responding unsure. However, almost one third of students agreed or strongly agreed that tuition fees had impacted their decision. This seems a smaller figure than Wilkins, Shams and Huismanhe (2013) who found financial issues were more important than 'institutional quality or reputation', as a consideration affecting study choices for sixth form students in England. However, it may be that most of these students, who have already made their choice to enter HE, may have reconciled tensions around tuition fees. There may also be different responses based on student background which would need further investigation. Wilkins et al., (2013) further cited increasing anxiety around financial issues for students of all backgrounds which universities need to be ready to support.

Almost all the first-year sport students were full-time, and 88% were aged either 18 or 19 years old. The number of black and minority ethnicity (BAME), mature and part-time students was low and below institutional and Higher Education Statistics Agency benchmarks. Our findings revealed 38% entered HE direct from a further education college. Further analysis revealed that 93% of students had completed a BTEC sport qualification (either at college or sixth form) with some having completed both A level and BTEC qualifications and a small number having completed A Levels only.

The prevalence of such large student numbers arriving with BTEC qualifications in sport, rather than A levels, exceeded staff perceptions and

may reflect the changing admissions points criteria at the University, guidance from schools, explicit reference to employability skills in the BTEC Sport programme handbook (Pearson.com, 2016) and/or the dominance of coursework over exams in these types of qualifications. The implications of this, however, point to the need to consider the previous experiences of such students around class sizes, staff to student ratios and summative assessment processes, which may be different to what they are about to experience at university.

Findings revealed that 33% of sport students lived at home and commuted daily into university. Whilst many of these 'commuters' live relatively locally to the campus, this evidently has implications for their ability to form community groups associated with accommodations, and hence potential marginalisation (Berger, 1997). This means that attention needs to be focussed on how best to ensure this group can integrate fully and happily into student life in other ways. In addition to this, over half of the sample (59%) were the first in their immediate family to attend university. This confirms that a large group of modern-day sports students are 'first generation' and hence may not benefit from informal transmission within the family of what university life is like. As previously identified by Allin et al., (2017), students revealed both academic and social aspects as challenges and concerns in the transition to university life. However, these were expressed in different ways. The highest number of responses to greatest challenges upon entering university were academic-related (65%), including getting to grips with assessment requirements, engaging with the course, managing workload, completing assessments to required academic standard, understanding subject knowledge and dealing with exams. Social challenges (35%) were related to being away from home, missing pets or family, settling in and being independent. In contrast, the highest number of student concerns (60%) related to the social elements around fitting in and making friends, with 28% of total responses referring to academic concerns, predominantly around assessments.

When considering these findings, we believe academic challenge to be partly advantageous for students as they are entering an academic degree programme. However, the high number of responses relating to assessments and workloads echoes suggestions by Fährat et al., (2017) that students may be feeling underprepared and suggests the need to reassure and scaffold students appropriately, particularly those unfamiliar with the type of assessments that they will encounter. The dominance of social concerns around fitting in reflects the findings of Wilcox et al., (2005) and Thomas (2012), thus reinforcing the need for universities to recognise the significance of these factors by providing the support needed in terms of early and frequent opportunities for students to mix and build relationships with a variety of staff and peers.

The significance of participation in sport to sport student's social integration and their identities, previously highlighted in Allin et al., (2017), is also reinforced in this study with the finding that 85% were members of a sports team prior to arriving at university. This is perhaps unsurprising, as sport participation most likely reflects their subject interest and motivation to study in this area. However, just under half (48%) intended to continue their sports participation by joining university sports teams. Given the knowledge that sport can help to establish friendships, the implications here need to be taken seriously to aid sport students' successful transition into university and to promote a healthy and active sport student lifestyle. This could be by finding ways to build practical competitive and recreational activities in and around the curriculum involving both staff and students, and by encouraging an ongoing sense of connection with sport whether in the same or a new sporting environment.

The Issue of 'Not Yet Settled' Students

Overall, there was little difference between 'settled' and 'not yet settled' student demographics. However, closer inspection suggests there were slightly more commuter students and BAME students and that across the 'not yet settled' group, a higher proportion knew fewer peers when compared to 'settled' students. We therefore suggest that these intersecting factors increased their chances of having a more difficult time in settling into university life. This supports other research that highlights more issues in transition for less traditional and minority student groups (Tinto, 2012) and the need to pay attention to such students and their specific needs.

Recommendations for Teaching and Learning Practice

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations for academics, educational developers and senior management teams are proposed:

Employability and Professional Skills- The embedding of employability is common within post 1992 university strategies and many publications and case studies exist on this (see Norton & Dalrymple, 2020). Yet, given the multiple meanings of 'employability' itself (Watts, 2006), we suggest that it is important to discuss with students from the outset of their degree programme what employability means, and where they are in terms of having the skills, understanding, competences and attributes to be successful. Universities should also understand the career aspirations of students and if they stay the same or change through their HE journeys. Through this, we can ensure effective workplace learning, skills and career readiness are embedded in a way that reflects the changing nature of employment and includes a range of experiences which are authentic to a range of graduate employment situations (Hall et al., 2016; Helyer & Lee, 2014). This involves

developing generic transferable skills as well as those specific to sport occupations.

Employability can also be embedded through authentic assessments, which may include live projects or collaborative initiatives across industry, which as students' progress, require synthesis and critical thought. Ultimately, as Watts (2006, p.6) highlights, a concern of universities should be 'not just with good academic practices but with promoting the goals of employability through such practices'. Moreover, Knight and Yorke (2004) note that employability needs to be sustainable and not only linked to obtaining a first job after graduating. Showing students how employability relates to growth, self-reflection and self-efficacy can link to students' personal development goals and help them develop or retain a sense of agency within competitive job markets. Many students from the sport degrees in this paper, for example, have gone on to create their own successful businesses, highlighting the importance of developing enterprise and entrepreneurship skills (Norton & Dalrymple, 2020).

Other ways to open student eyes to opportunities can involve creating employability stories, from both guest lecturer employers and alumni, so that students can see the progression of former students and the range of graduate jobs that can be achieved in a way that is real and relevant to them. Taking ongoing opportunities for interactions with alumni can ensure they remain engaged and connected to their degree programme and support future graduates.

Social Integration- With social integration highest on the list of student concerns, we propose this as the priority area across the first year. Induction or 'Welcome Weeks' should be just that, providing positive first impressions and opportunities to meet peers and staff in a welcoming, inclusive and supportive environment. For sport students, drawing on a shared sense of sport enjoyment is recommended. This may be best achieved through including an inclusive range of sporting or recreational activities including less traditional pursuits such as indoor climbing, teambuilding and/or multi-skill activities ideally over an intensive shared period of time to encourage relationship building. The aim should be to involve academic staff to help develop a sense of identity outside the formal curriculum. As the course develops, social events (e.g., away days, team quizzes) or opportunities to watch and play sport can be advertised, alongside opportunities for practical sports involvement within and outside of the curriculum. Whilst this might seem an onerous addition for course teams to consider, it can also promote considerable fun and enjoyment for both sides which can potentially be positive for both staff and student sense of well-being.

Our previous research suggested commuter students can miss out on social groups which revolve around accommodation (Allin et al., 2017), so the

creation of course social media platforms may help prospective sport students seek out and develop connections prior to their arrival. Considering the timings of modules to reduce gaps between lectures may encourage students to stay on campus longer to meet peers after classes, and the use of small group teaching can help students feel valued, understood and part of university life from day one. More workshop style teaching can enhance sociability, build reading, research and writing habits, and ease the transition to independent learning. Ensuring sessions are likely timetabled within open-plan settings with information technology facilities available is strongly recommended, although it is recognised that many universities may not have ideal teaching spaces for group-based learning. But with imagination, students can work together in a multitude of environments - even outside!

Academic Integration- A key study finding was that sport students perceived the academic requirements of transitioning to university, particularly summative assessments, to be challenging (and in some cases, concerning). This highlights the importance of providing early and clear information concerning the different types of assessment likely to be faced including how they may differ from students' prior, possibly BTEC, experiences, and how they are achievable. Showcasing examples of a range of assessment types with top tips from second and third year peers would be useful so they can see where they can apply their strengths as well as making a realistic appraisal of the challenges.

It is easy to forget in the move to electronic submission that students may not be clear on how and when to submit electronically and, by providing suitable guidance, these unnecessary stressors may be easily removed. Support on planning assessments can also be provided early on. Although sharing drafts with others is not permitted, one practice in a first semester, first year module in the sport degrees in this paper has involved personal tutors supporting the planning and writing of the first essay to be summatively assessed. Personal tutors also provide feedback on an initial draft submission such that students are given a clear practical indication of the standard required prior to the final submission of a possibly revised version the essay.

Regular formative assessment can both reassure students on an individual basis and help them understand where they are and where they need to be, thus minimising the assessment gap in expectations and showing clearly how to improve for future work. Given that the early stages of university transition can be a particularly sensitive time for students, we believe it is important to provide additional academic and personal guidance to ensure they have accurate expectations and feel suitably confident, connected, prepared and supported. Ensuring academic staff are freely available to field questions and offer clear, accurate and consistent information during semester one is

recommended. Peer assisted learning schemes are further examples of good practice and opportunities for students to ask questions.

Although the use of Panopto in HE may be controversial (Bos et al., 2016), using it to video record assessment sessions may reassure students that they have not missed essential information. Current evidence is divided as to whether recording lectures positively influences learning (Draper et al. 2018), but for those students who may take longer to digest information, who may want to review their understanding, or who may unavoidably miss an assessment session, it may provide a valuable inclusive support mechanism.

Staff Development and Students as Partners- Many of our recommendations are for staff and managers in terms of suggestions and examples of useful practice. However, many staff may need further development to fully appreciate the role they can play in the successful transition of this particular profile of students. A useful approach may be to provide targeted professional development activities for academic staff to develop explicit awareness around their roles as personal tutors, which extend beyond the traditional view of seeing students only when issues arise (Yale, 2019).

The ability of tutors to build positive relationships with their personal tutees has important implications throughout students' university journeys, particularly if tutors remain with the same students. In this way, personal tutors can not only play a leading role in supporting students' career development, but such relations can lay the foundation for working with students across all levels, encouraging them to become peer mentors or working with them as partners in ensuring that future first year students are well supported to meet challenges and have their concerns addressed.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

This paper is derived from survey data in which responses rely on both the way questions are presented and student interpretations of their meaning. For some questions, students could provide multiple responses, thus making it more difficult to identify the most salient features. Given the importance of employability in their answers, it would also have been useful to have interviewed a number of both 'settled' and 'not yet settled' students to unearth more concerning the motivating factors for sport students and how they view the contribution of their sport degree to their future career aspirations. This survey has suggested several further questions regarding students' hopes for their university education, which may be applicable for other subject choices. Examples include: what does success at university look like to them? do they believe that a university experience is valuable beyond employability? how much does academic study really matter to them and how important is it that they continue to play and involve themselves in sport?

Conclusions

This study provides a timely insight into the nature and profiles of modern-day university sport students with potential implications for other degree subjects. Important key findings were the shift towards vocational entry qualifications (e.g., BTEC), the heavy emphasis placed on employability and career prospects, and the key expectations, challenges and concerns around their social and academic needs. Some study findings closely resemble key principles of Student Involvement Theory (Astin, 1984). Broadly speaking, this theory implies that the more students feel academically and socially involved, then the better their overall learning experience will be. Therefore, 'involved' students in this study would be reflective of those who spend greater amounts of time studying, feel more confident and settled in their new surroundings, interact more frequently with peers and actively participate in student organizations and activities. Alternatively, the 'uninvolved' students would be categorised as those who expressed greater concerns or challenges towards their university transition, spend less time on campus, withheld from extracurricular activities, struggled with or neglected their studies and rarely initiated contact with academic staff and other students (Astin, 1984).

References

- Allin, L., Coyles, A., & Hayman, R. (2017). Exploring social integration of sport students during the transition to university. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, **5**, 31-36.
- Astin, A. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, **25**, 297-308.
- Baloo, K., Pauli, R., & Worrell, M. (2017). Undergraduates personal circumstances, expectations and reasons for attending university. *Studies in Higher Education*, **42**, 1373-1384.
- Baloo, K. (2018). In-depth profiles of the expectations of undergraduate students commencing university: a Q methodological analysis. *Studies in Higher Education*. **43**, 2251-2262.
- Barkas, L., Poppit, N., & Smith, P. (2019). Tinker, tailor, policy-maker: can the UK government's teaching excellence framework deliver its objectives? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, **43**, 801-813.
- Beer, C., & Lawson, C. (2017). The problem of student attrition in higher education: an alternative perspective. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, **41**, 773-784.

Bennet, R., Kottasz, R., & Nocciolino, J. (2007). Catching the early walker: an examination of potential antecedents of rapid student exit from business related undergraduate degree programs in a post 1992 university. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, **31**, 347-364.

Berger, J. (1997). Students' sense of community in residence halls, social integration, and first-year persistence. *Journal of College Student Development*, **38**, 441-452.

Berger, J., Blanco, B., Ramirez, G., & Lyons, S. (2012). *Past to present: a historical look at retention*. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College student retention: formula for student success* (2nd ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Bos, N., Groenvelde, C., Bruggen, J., & Brand-Gruwel, S. (2016). The use of recorded lectures in education and the impact on lecture attendance and exam performance. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, **47**, 906-917.

Brinkworth, R., McCann, B., Matthews, C., & Nordstrom, K. (2009). First year expectations and experiences: students and teacher perspectives. *Higher Education*, **58**, 157-173.

Briggs, S. (2006). An exploratory study of the factors influencing undergraduate student choice: the case of higher education in Scotland. *Studies in Higher Education*, **31**, 705-722.

Britton, J., Dearden, L., Shephard, N., & Vignoles, A. (2016). *How English domiciled graduate earnings vary with gender, institution attended, subject and socio-economic background*. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Bunce, L., Baird, A., & Jones, S. (2017). The student as consumer approach in higher education and its effects on academic performance. *Studies in Higher Education*, **42**, 1958-1978.

Byrne, M., Flood, B., Hassall, T., Joyce, J., Montano, J., Gonzalez, J., & Tournia-Germanou, E. (2012). Motivations, expectations and preparedness for higher education: a study of accounting students in Ireland, the UK, Spain and Greece. *Accounting Forum*, **36**, 134-144.

Dearing, R. (1997). *Higher education in the learning society: report of the national committee of inquiry into higher education*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

Draper, M., Gibbon, S. & Thomas, J. (2018). Lecture recording: a new norm. *The Law Teacher*, **52**, 316-334.

- Farhat G., Bingham, J., Caulfield, J., & Grieve, S. (2017). The academics project: widening access and smoothing transitions for secondary school pupils to university, college and employment. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, **5**, 23-30.
- Gamache, P. (2002). University students as creators of personal knowledge: an alternative epistemological view. *Teaching in Higher Education*, **7**, 277-293.
- Gill, A. (2019). Student transition into higher education: exploring BTEC sport and exercise students forthcoming transition to higher education taught within a further education setting. *Innovative Practice in Higher Education*, **3**, 90-112.
- Groves, M., Bowd, B., & Smith, J. (2010). Facilitating experiential learning of study skills in sports students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, **34**, 11-22.
- Hall, E., Cowan, D., & Vickery, W. (2016). 'You don't need a degree to get a coaching job': investigating the employability of sports coaching degree students. *Sport, Education and Society*, **24**, 883-903.
- Hayman, R. (2017). Using flipped classroom to place sport students learning at centre stage: insights and food for thought. *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, **3**, 23-34.
- Hayman, R. (2018). A flipped learning maiden voyage: insights and experiences of undergraduate sport coaching students. *Innovative Practice in Higher Education*, **3**, 81-102.
- Helyer, R., & Lee, D. (2014). The role of work experience in the future employability of higher education graduates. *Higher Education Quarterly*, **68**, 348-372.
- Higher Education Statistics Agency (n.d). Non-continuation: UK Performance Indicators. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/non-continuation-1819> (Table series T3, Accessed 28/07/2020).
- Hockings, C., Thomas, L., Ottaway, J., & Jones, R. (2018). Independent learning: what we do when you are not there. *Teaching in Higher Education*, **23**, 145-161.
- Kahu, E., & Nelson, K. (2018). Student engagement in the educational interface: understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development*, **37**, 58-71.

Knetz, E., & McCartney, M. (2018). What can departments do to increase student's retention? A case study of students' sense of belonging and involvement in a biology department. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, **19**, 1-22.

Knight, P., & Yorke, M. (2004). *Learning, curriculum and employability in higher education*. London: Routledge.

Kreig, D. (2013). High expectations for higher education? perceptions of college and experiences of stress prior to and through the college career. *College Student Journal*, **47**, 635-643.

Kuh, G., Kinzie, J., Buckley, J., Bridges, B., & Hayle, J. (2007). Piecing together the student success puzzle: research, propositions and recommendations. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, **32**, 1-5.

Leese, M. (2010). Bridging the gap: supporting students into higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, **34**, 239-251.

Lobo, A., & Gurney, L. (2014). What did they expect? exploring a link between students' expectations, attendance and attrition on English language courses. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, **38**, 730-754.

Lowe, H., & Cook, A. (2003). Mind the gap: are students prepared for higher education? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, **27**, 53-76.

McMillan, W. (2013). Transition to university: the role played by emotion. *European Journal of Dental Education*, **17**, 169-176.

Murtagh, L. (2010). They give us homework! transition to higher education: the case of initial teacher training. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, **34**, 405-418.

Murtagh, L. (2012). Enhancing preparation for higher education. *Practitioner Research in Higher Education*, **6**, 31-39.

Norton, S., & Dalrymple, R. (2020). *Enhancing Graduate Employability: a case study compendium*. York: Advance HE.

O`Shea, S., Stone, C., Delahunty, J., & May, J. (2018). Discourses of betterment and opportunity: exploring the privileging of university attendance for first in family learners. *Studies in Higher Education*, **43**, 1020-1033.

Pearson.com. (2016). BTEC nationals
<https://qualifications.pearson.com/en/qualifications/btec-nationals.html>
(Accessed 11/03/2020)

Phinney, J., Dennis, J., & Osorio, S. (2006). Reasons to attend college among ethnically diverse college students. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, **12**, 347-366.

Pillay, A., & Ngcobo, H. (2010). Sources of stress and support among rural based first year university students: an exploratory study. *South African Journal of Psychology*, **49**, 234-240.

Richardson, A., King, S., Garrett, R., & Wrench, A. (2012). Thriving or just surviving? exploring student strategies for a smoother transition to university. a practice report. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, **3**, 87-93.

Rubin, A. (2012). *Statistics for evidence-based practice and evaluation*. Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning.

Stivastra, S., Tamir, M., McGonigal, M., John, O., & Gross, J. (2009). The social costs of emotional suppression: a prospective study of the transition to college. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **96**, 883-897.

Surgenor, P. (2013). Measuring up: comparing first year students and tutors' expectations of assessment. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, **38**, 288-302.

Tett, I., Cree, V., & Christie, H. (2017). From further education to higher education: transition as an on-going process. *Higher Education*, **73**, 389-406.

Thomas, L. (2012). *Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change: a summary of findings and recommendations from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme*. York: Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Higher Education Academy.

Tinto, V. (2012). *Moving from theory to action: a model of institutional action for student success*. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College student retention: formula for student success* (2nd ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Universities UK. (2018). *Patterns and trends in UK higher education 2018*. London: Universities UK.

Voss, R., Gruber, T., & Szmigin, I. (2007). Service quality in higher education: the role of student expectations. *Journal of Business Research*, **60**, 949-959.

Watts, A.G. (2006). *Career development learning and employability*. York: The Higher Education Academy.

Wilcox, P., Winn, S., & Fyvie-Gauld, M. (2005). 'It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people': the role of social support in the first-year experience of higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, **30**, 707-722.

Wilkins, S., Shams, F., & Huisman, J. (2013) The decision-making and changing behavioural dynamics of potential higher education students: the impacts of increasing tuition fees in England. *Educational Studies*, **39**, 125-141.

Woosley, S. (2003). How important are the first few weeks of college? the long-term effects of initial college experiences. *College Student Journal*, **37**, 201-202.

Yale, A. (2019). The personal tutor-student relationship: student expectations and experiences of personal tutoring in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, **43**, 533-544.

Yorke, M. & Knight, P. (2006). *Embedding employability in the curriculum*. Learning and Employability Series. York: Higher Education Academy.

Authors' Disclosure Statement

All materials included in the article represent the authors' own work and anything cited or paraphrased within the text is included in the reference list. The work has not been previously published nor is it being considered for publication elsewhere. There are no conflicts of interest that have influenced the authors in reporting their findings completely and honestly.