
CUCD Transition Survey 2015-16

Helen Lovatt

University of Nottingham

Chair, CUCD Education Committee

Helen.Lovatt@nottingham.ac.uk

TL:DR summary

Generally speaking transition is going well, and most students settle in effectively. Students in Classical subjects have a good attitude to learning and are already autonomous when they arrive. There is most anxiety about assessment and language learning. Women are more anxious than men, but mature students are least anxious and should be regarded as a transition asset. Students find web-based material and open days the most useful form of transition support.

Recommendations:

- Tailored support for female students, perhaps with groups of older women, perhaps at open days
- Online material on managing and reducing anxiety, particularly about language learning, handling assessment, especially exams, and studying Classics if you have not done Classical subjects at school
- Reductions in anxiety should help to create more autonomous learners

Context

The CUCD education and Classical Association Teaching Board panel at CA2016 in Edinburgh focussed on issues of transition: how do students move from one level of education to another? What issues do they encounter and how can we help them? Are different groups affected differently? What should our priorities be in supporting transition?

I presented a paper based on the findings of a survey that was sent out to all UK Classics departments via their CUCD contacts, about transition into first year of university. This piece reports on the findings of that survey.

Aims

The survey aimed to assess students' anxiety and confidence as they started their degrees and later once they had settled in, to see how anxiety varied between different groups and at different stages. It also had a section that focused on attitudes to learning and expectations of university. How autonomous were students in their attitudes to learning? Does this change across the first year? The survey also attempted to assess the effectiveness of different types of support and solicit ideas for more effective support from students themselves.

Respondents

There were two surveys, one in late September/early October, as students were starting their degrees, and one in March to allow students to reflect on how their first year was going. The first questionnaire was circulated by email to CUCD contacts and then around departments. Respondents included students from Oxford, Cambridge, Glasgow, Cardiff, Birmingham, Manchester and Nottingham, so covered a wide range of universities. 284 responses were received, and many gave detailed comments. 93 agreed to receive a follow-up email and 42 students responded to Questionnaire 2.

The self-selecting group who answered the questionnaires had a high proportion of language-based Classicists (46.5%), and a higher than expected proportion of mature students (9.3%). More women than men answered the questionnaire, but gender balance was not out of keeping for the discipline (58.5% female, 41.5% male). A high proportion of those who answered the questionnaire had taken qualifications other than A-levels (26.2%). International students were also well-represented (from seven European countries as well as North America and India). Most respondents had studied History (55.3%), English (50.8%), Latin (43.6%) and Classical Civilisation (38.3%) before university. There was a very wide range of subjects studied in total, showing the wide appeal of Classics degrees to students of varying intellectual backgrounds. While all this brings out the idiosyncratic nature of the sample, and this survey is only one snapshot of a particular year group, the text answers were particularly useful and detailed.

Confidence and anxiety

The questionnaire asked students to rate their confidence and anxiety about starting their degree. In Questionnaire 1 (Q1) 62% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt confident about starting their degree. The percentage was higher for men (68%) and mature students (71%), and lower for women (57%) and those studying in translation (54%). Those who were confident, however, were sometimes also anxious, since 62% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt anxious about starting their degree. The gap between male (49%) and female (72%) respondents was larger here, and here those studying language-based classics were readier to see themselves as anxious (65%).

Students were most worried about the academic aspects of their course, especially assessments and essay writing, but also reading large amounts of text, not knowing the answers and keeping up with language work. They were least anxious about practical aspects

such as being on time, living away from home, making notes and organising themselves. Social anxieties were fairly low down the scale (talking in public, meeting people, friendships). There was some variation between male and female respondents: men were more worried about meeting people, women about talking in public.

Autonomous learners

Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with statements about their own attitude to and competence in learning, in order to produce an autonomy rating. There was a mixture of statements about preference for independent learning versus reliance on teachers, assessments of deep and surface attitudes to learning, integrative attitudes to learning, and flexibility. I created an autonomy rating for various cohorts with a rating out of 5, where 5 was most autonomous and 1 was least autonomous. All respondents scored well in this rating, with the average being 3.64. Students already show high levels of autonomy (or desire for autonomy) when they arrive at university to study Classical subjects. Autonomy was highest among mature students and lowest amongst those studying for in-translation degrees.

Which sources of support were most useful?

The final question asked students which sources of support they found most useful before and during their initial period at university. By far the most valuable was departmental websites, followed by the university prospectus, and information packs sent in advance, or online reading lists. Open days were also felt to be useful preparation. Week one events such as induction meetings, tutor group meetings and mentoring schemes were moderately useful, while social media contact was not felt to be particularly useful. This may mask great variation of practice across different departments, but perhaps indicates that more thought is needed about supporting students using online materials and managing expectations using prospectuses and open days.

Questionnaire 2

Students who answered the second questionnaire were even more self-selecting, with more still women (74%), mature students (24%), non-standard qualifications (39%) and state school (54%, 34% private). 60% were studying language-based Classics. The majority of respondents were good students, receiving grades in the first and 2.1 categories (92%). This raises the issue of how to reach those who are not making a successful transition, since they are the people least likely to respond to a questionnaire and least likely to attend a focus group. Gathering information through pastoral contacts raises potential ethical issues, but might lead to focus group participation.

By the time of the second questionnaire, respondents were much more confident (100% of male respondents, 75% of female respondents). Anxiety levels had reduced from 67% to 52%, with male respondents down to 36%. The different aspects which worry people had stayed more or less the same: keeping up with language work had become more of a worry, and not knowing the answers less of a worry (perhaps because the category of 'the answers' had been problematised). The autonomy rating of this self-selecting group had slightly reduced,

suggesting perhaps a greater awareness of their own limitations as learners. It was still, however, very good. Feelings about which types of support had been useful had not significantly changed.

The digest of comments revealed that Greek is a particular challenge for those who are taking it, and that people felt their expectations of university had been broadly realistic. Suggestions for improved support include: more information aimed at students whose parents have not been to university; avoid too much overlap in induction and open day events; more taster sessions as part of open days; earlier access to preparation packs and reading lists (with offer); help with using VLEs as part of induction.

Conclusions

Much of what we do to inform and reassure students is effective. Students themselves are confident and mature learners already. Mature students in particular are an asset: rather than focusing 'inreach' on them as a group with special needs, we should perhaps be giving them opportunities to share their skills with other students. Those who need most support, in fact, are female students studying in-translation degrees. Some confidence building work with older female students might be one way to help. Since groups that feel more anxious also have lower autonomy ratings, better support for anxiety might also improve learning. Since students find online materials most useful in supporting them, perhaps online materials about building confidence and managing anxiety might help. A particular focus of anxiety is language work, not having studied Classical subjects before university and assessment, especially exams. Perhaps interviews with students who have overcome initial anxiety in these areas might be useful as part of online transition materials.