The Lived Experiences of Transition from College to University in Scotland: A Qualitative Research Synthesis

LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The Scottish Government has recently accepted the recommendations of the Scottish Funding Council to move towards a coherent tertiary education and skills system. This is one where colleges and universities in Scotland accelerate and deepen their collaboration to provide fair, flexible, and sustainable learner journeys.

This paper provides a timely summary and analysis of what is known about the lived experiences of those involved in making effective transitions from college to university in Scotland. Previous project work has identified this transition as problematic, suggesting an academic 'deficit model' of college students transitioning to university. This qualitative research synthesis seeks to move beyond this to identify common themes from published literature to inform learning and teaching practice in both colleges and universities in Scotland. These themes include the sectoral, academic, personal and logistical factors that influence making effective transitions. We raise key topics for discussion in relation to the development of a coherent tertiary sector: (1) Responsibility for Transition, (2) Alignment between Colleges and Universities and, (3) Widening Participation. While our findings will have clear implications for those in the Scottish sector, more broadly it also has implications for all those considering relationships in, and between, further and higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has recommended (subsequently accepted by the Scottish Government (2021)) that the Scottish sector move towards 'a coherent tertiary education and skills provision' (SFC, 2021), one where colleges and universities accelerate and deepen their collaboration to provide fair, flexible, and sustainable learner journeys. This paper aims to support that move by providing a qualitative synthesis of research into the known experiences of students and staff of the academic transition from college to university in Scotland over the past 10 years.

We used systematic selection criteria to identify 10 peer-reviewed papers dealing with the learning and teaching experiences and perceptions of students attending university via a college route and academic staff who support them. We started from a broad understanding of 'transition'. At a basic level the transition we are exploring is the movement of students from a college setting to a university setting. We recognise, though, that the process might more accurately be described using the plural 'transitions', incorporating the complex interplay of personal, sociocultural, academic and physical changes that students experience. As O'Donnell et al. (2018: 25) argue:

> Transitions within the context of education are viewed, fundamentally, as a process of adjustment and change and so the metaphor of a 'journey' is often used to conceptualise the individual and the setting they operate and interact within. [...] These transitions can be seen as an educational undertaking with agreed markers or turning points[.]

This paper provides a timely summary and analysis of what is known about the lived experiences of those involved in making effective transitions from college to university in Scotland. Previous project work (such as that completed under the QAA Enhancement Theme from 2014–2107 (QAA, undated)), and the dominant discourse in receiving universities, has identified this transition as problematic, suggesting an academic 'deficit model' of college students transitioning to university. This qualitative research synthesis presents common themes from published literature to inform learning and teaching practice in both colleges and universities in Scotland. These themes include the sectoral, academic, personal and logistical factors which influence making effective transitions. We raise key topics for discussion in relation to the development of a coherent tertiary sector: (1) Responsibility for Transition, (2) Alignment between Colleges and Universities and, (3) Widening Participation.

CONTEXT: TERTIARY EDUCATION IN SCOTLAND

Tertiary education in Scotland consists of 26 colleges (covering 13 geographic regions) (Colleges Scotland, 2022) and 19 universities or specialist higher education providers (Universities Scotland, 2022). The main funding body for these institutions is the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). All qualifications and awards in Scotland are benchmarked against a common Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).

A regional model for college provision was created following the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013. College regions consist of 10 single-college regions and 3 multi-college regions, each of which is overseen by a regional college board that strategically plans provision and agrees regional outcome agreements between colleges and the SFC (O'Donnell, 2022). Colleges deliver a mix of further and higher education, as defined by the SCQF, where levels 1 to 6 typically represent school and further education qualifications and levels 7 to 12 higher education levels, from undergraduate through to doctoral programmes. Colleges support a range of qualifications that are accredited by outside bodies, such as the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). These include National Certificates (SCQF Level 4), Modern Apprenticeships (Level 5), Higher National Certificates (HNC) (Level 7), Higher National Diplomas (HND) (Level 8) and Diplomas of Higher Education (Level 8). HNCs and HNDs are 'vocational-related courses offering a mix of practical skills and theoretical knowledge. College based HNC/Ds are also designed to allow progression onto university degree programmes' (O'Donnell, 2022). In addition, a number of colleges offer degree programmes; within the Scottish sector, degree awarding powers are reserved for universities and so these qualifications are validated by and, in some cases, delivered in partnership with universities.

The 19 institutions that make up the membership of the representative body Universities Scotland, consist of four ancient universities, four universities incorporated in the 1960s following the Robbins Report, five 'post-1992' institutions created by the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act of 1992, two universities incorporated in the early 2000s, three specialist higher education institutions and the distance-learning Open University of Scotland. Universities are predominately focussed on delivering SCQF level 7 and above, with levels 7 to 10 covering undergraduate (UG) degree programmes. An UG honours degree programme at a Scottish institution typically takes four years to complete.

Students progressing from college to university do so via three routes:

- Advanced standing: where full academic credit is given for college study.
- Advanced progression: where partial academic credit is given for college study.
- Progression: no academic credit for college study is given, beyond admission to year 1 of the degree programme.

Admission with advanced standing is typically managed by an articulation agreement between universities and colleges. Under these agreements the university will accept onto a degree programme students with a particular approved qualification from the college, with HNC students entering the second year of a degree programme and HND students the third year. In academic year 2018–19, 57% of students who entered university within three years of completion of a college course (4926/8636) did so with advanced standing, 9% (781/8636) with advanced progression and 34% (2929/8636) with progression (SFC, 2020a). In total, 28% of Scottish university first-degree entrants arrived via a college route, with 42% of university entrants from the most deprived geographic quintiles following this route (SFC, 2020a).

This last figure illustrates part of the drive to support pathways from college to university study. Since 2016, following the Scottish Government's Commission on Widening Access's *A Blueprint for Fairness* which states 'that a child born today in one of our most deprived communities will, by the time he or she leaves school, have the same chance of entering university as a child born in one of our least deprived communities' (Scottish Government, 2016), university funding agreements have included provision for widening participation. In 2020–21, 16.7% of full-time first-year undergraduate students came from the most deprived quintile, an increase from 12.2% in 2016–17 (Scottish Government, 2022). Despite this success the Commissioner for Fair Access warns that 'the Scottish "tertiary" system remains fragmented, with HEIs and colleges treated separately despite both being funded by the SFC, and other agencies responsible for training and skills. Learners from deprived backgrounds would benefit from less fragmentation and better coordination' (Scottish Government, 2022).

More widely across the UK, a policy discussion is taking place around the development of a more coherent tertiary education sector fostered by collaboration between colleges and universities. The Colleges of the Future report (Alway et al., 2022), part of a series considering college-university relations across the four nations of the UK, contends that 'a "whole systems" approach must be taken to education and skills, and that universities and colleges should sit within a joined-up, holistic tertiary education and skills system within each of the four nations' (Alway et al., 2022: 5). A further publication in this series, focused specifically on Scotland (Independent Commission on the College of the Future, 2022), suggests that the regionalised nature of colleges in Scotland provides a structure on which closer integrations across the tertiary sector can be founded and that 'there is now a real opportunity, and, in the context of post-COVID economic recovery, an urgent need, to capitalise on these strengths and create a truly integrated tertiary system' (Independent Commission on the College of the Future, 2022: 9).

This policy direction has been endorsed by public bodies and the Scottish Government. The SFC recommended that the Scottish sector move towards 'a coherent tertiary education and skills provision' (SFC, 2021), where colleges and universities accelerate and deepen their collaboration to provide fair, flexible, and sustainable learner journeys. This recommendation was subsequently accepted by the Scottish Government (Scottish Government, 2021). This change in policy and approach is leading to important conversations in the sector about what tertiary education looks like in practice, and how current partnerships, such as QAA Enhancement Themes (https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/) and sector-wide committees, work to co-create this emerging tertiary framework.

METHODS

We used the context outlined above to frame our research on a specific question:

> What are the lived experiences of students who transition from college to university in Scotland, and that of the staff who support them?

This question therefore aims to identify issues that will be useful to address in the move to a more coherent tertiary sector in Scotland.

We agreed on a qualitative research synthesis of studies approach to answer the research question. This approach is taken because qualitative research 'is aimed at investigating the ways in which people make sense of their ideas and experiences' (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013: 11) and a systematic synthesis of qualitative studies would allow for these experiences to be explored within the context identified. While we have used quantitative data to provide context above, as this study was focussed on individual experiences we did not feel that the inclusion of quantitative studies would assist in answering our research question.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH SYNTHESIS

Qualitative research synthesis is a systematic approach to the meta-analysis of previously published qualitative research and this paper follows the method outlined by Major and Savin-Baden (2010).

Timilak (2014) suggests that one of the main aims of meta-analysis is 'to provide a concise and comprehensive picture of findings across … studies' (Timilak, 2014: 481). While 'qualitative research has been valued because of its ability to provide depth of information about a particular phenomenon' with the research presenting 'a rich, thick description of a snapshot in time and place' (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010: 15), synthesis complements this 'by pursuing both depth and breadth simultaneously. Qualitative research synthesis can provide an overarching and comprehensive glimpse of what the in depth individual qualitative snapshot reveals' (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010: 15).

While the intention of this paper is to present an analysis of published work on students' transitions in a particular country, the aim is to present insights for practitioners and policymakers working in tertiary education in Scotland and beyond. By presenting a broad view 'qualitative research synthesis can provide answers from a range of research, which most users of research (i.e., practitioners and policy makers) are more comfortable in relying on, in preference to results from only one individual study' (Major & Savin Baden, 2010: 15).

A common, if misconceived, criticism of qualitative research is the lack of transferability of findings from individual studies to other contexts. By broadening analysis across a number of studies, qualitative research synthesis can make transferability, and actionable insights, more obvious thus helping to support evidence-informed practice.

SELECTION OF STUDIES

In contrast to a narrative literature review, which may 'produce a description or demonstration of a state of knowledge' (Major & Savin Baden, 2010: 16), a qualitative synthesis seeks to treat the literature identified as a source for further analysis (hence the crossover with the term 'meta-analysis'). Therefore, as with any research data, the selection of papers follows a systematic approach.

Given the features of the Scottish tertiary sector outlined above, the following search criteria were applied for this synthesis:

- because of the localised nature of the review the search was restricted to the British Education Index, a database that covers the major research journals focussed on the UK tertiary sector
- in order to focus on studies of recognised quality the search considered only articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals
- in recognition of the changes in the Scottish college sector outlined above, particularly the importance of regionalisation and mergers, only articles published after 2012 were included

- in order to focus on the subject the search was performed using the following keywords: (college or further education) and (transition or articulation) and (university or higher education) and (Scotland or Scottish).

This search produced 44 candidate papers for analysis. Both researchers then independently read the abstracts of these papers to ensure that they met the above criteria. An additional criterion, that was difficult to allow for in a keyword search, was added at this stage:

- the papers cover qualitative research into the experiences of students transitioning from college to university and/or the staff who support them.

This process led to 10 papers being identified for inclusion in the analysis. Table 1 presents a summary of the studies. As the research did not involve human subjects ethical approval was not required.

ANALYSIS

Analysis was guided by the six phases of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. As Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasise that this is intended to be a reflexive approach the process was flexible and collaborative. Data familiarisation (Phase 1) occurred through the process of selecting and reading papers. Both researchers then used an inductive approach to generate codes independently (Phase 2). An 'initial' or 'open' coding approach was used (Saldana, 2013) with the researchers using different techniques during code generation, one favouring a software-supported approach (using MaxQDA) and the other using a more manual process. Through a series of discussions, themes were developed (Phase 3) from the initial coding and, in an iterative process, these were reviewed and refined through the collaborative writing process (Phases 4–6).

This research takes an exclusively qualitative approach presenting a 'thick' description (Geertz, 1973) of the practice presented in the papers studied.

The criteria developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to assess the quality of qualitative research were applied to this study:

- Credibility – inclusion criteria were systematically developed and described; data familiarisation began during the selection process for each paper and continued through initial coding; themes generation was a collaborative and iterative process. The researchers used a structured thematic analysis approach to manage the stages of analysis.
- Transferability - as mentioned above, by conducting a qualitative synthesis the researchers hope to develop generalisable themes across the contexts of the studies analysed.
- Dependability – detailed selection and analysis criteria are shared here and data sources are available.
- Confirmability – initial coding was performed separately by each researcher with theme development and analysis taking place collaboratively and iteratively.

FINDINGS

Analysis identified four themes from the literature: (1) Sectoral Factors, (2) Academic Factors, (3) Identity and Social Factors, (4) Logistical Factors. We will discuss each in turn.

SECTORAL FACTORS

A key consideration across all the papers is the importance of routes from college to university in widening access to, and participation in, higher education in Scotland. Such routes are seen as ways in which 'under-represented communities' (Campbell & McAdam, 2022: 106), including those with 'non-traditional qualifications or students from areas of social or economic deprivation' (Mayne et.al., 2015: 165) can gain access to university. A wide variety of different routes are presented, but there is a recognition that these were more prevalent and developed in the 'post-1992' institutions than in other traditional or 'elite' ones. Opening routes to university is not, by itself, seen as the solution as:

Table 1 Summary and comparison of papers analysed.

	BREEZE ET AL. (2020)	CAMPBELL & MCADAM (2022)	CHRISTIE ET AL. (2016)	CHRISTIE ET AL. (2013)	GLEN (2018)	MAYNE ET AL. (2015)	MEHARG ET AL. (2017A)	MEHARG ET AL. (2017B)	O'DONNELL ET AL. (2018)	TETT ET AL. (2017)
Sample	27 students - 4 for focus group	1015 students	20 students	20 students	3 members of staff: 1 at university, 2 at college	12 academics	10 students	Students and Staff	14 student interviews, 21 students in two further focus groups. 6 teachers	45 students at university, 15 of which were followed up on 10 years later
Setting	HND into Year 2 of Psychology, Public Sociology, Psychology & Sociology degrees at one Scottish University	Transition programme for college students holding an articulation offer (HNC->2, HND->3) at one Scottish university. The focus is the shift from f2f programme to online due to Covid-19	A prestigious, research intensive, Scottish university. Social Science and Humanities courses.	Direct Entry into 2nd or 3rd year of degree programme at one Scottish university. Business School.	Project between one college and one university in Scotland. Sport and Leisure.	A Community of Practice with 12 members, from one Scottish university and a range of colleges. Nursing.	Associate Student scheme at one Scottish university. University interaction with students whilst at college. Computing.	Associate Student scheme at one Scottish University. University interaction with students whilst at college. Computing.	First year student focus.	Prestigious, research intensive, Scottish university. Humanities and Social Sciences
Methods	Bourdieusian' approach related to understanding belonging.	Student feedback on online modules	Longitudinal study of lived experience across degree	Longitudinal study of lived experience across degree	Thematic analysis	Collaboration, wikis. Two projects: (1) student expectations of HE, (2) Learning and Teaching questions	Mixed methods. Quantitative for retention and attainment, qualitative for the lived experience of students.	Evaluation of programme - mixed methods	Qualitative approach exploring the lived experience of students.	Longitudinal study of lived experience across degree and beyond. Thematic analysis
Data Collection	Focus group	Likert scales and qualitative responses	Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews	Semi-structured interviews	Interviews	Varied. From students and staff, virtually and face-to-face	Data extraction, focus groups, interviews, questionnaires	Data extraction, focus groups and surveys	Semi-structured interviews. Themes identified. Supplemented by focus groups. Interviews with teachers followed.	Interviews
Notion of Validity	Trustworthy and reflexive	Trustworthy and reflexive	Trustworthy and reflexive	Trustworthy and reflexive	Trustworthy and reflexive	Community of Practice	Trustworthy and reflexive	Trustworthy and reflexive	Trustworthy and reflexive	Trustworthy and reflexive
Positioning of the Researcher	Teachers and researchers	Teacher and researcher	Researchers & one teacher	Researcher and teachers	Teaching Fellow at partner institution	Members of Community of Practice	Teachers and researchers	Teachers and researchers	Teachers and researchers	Researchers and teacher
Main themes and concepts identified by study authors	(1) Academic challenge. Being at university might be helpful - bridging or summer schools. Missing work from Year 1. (2) Staff relationships. Harder to connect with staff compared to university. (3) Othering and targeting DE students might be counter-productive, perhaps all students need transition support. (4) Sustainability of support, particularly if relying on volunteers.	(1) Effectiveness linked to Zepke and Leach (2010) model. (2) Academic as well as social concerns for articulation students.	(1) Belonging at university, accepted identity. (2) Academic skills development, particularly criticality. (3) Independent / autonomous learner	(1) Three groupings emerged: successful independent learners, hard-working middle, strugglers. Turns on how students adapted to new learning environment. (2) University staff more 'remote' than college staff. (3) Time-management a key factor. (4) Academic Skills a factor	(1) Academic skills lacking when getting into university. (2) University staff have not got the time/ resource to address this. So need to develop support earlier in process. (3) If the project was removed students would suffer.	(1) Student expectation of academic requirements of university not always good. (2) Teaching approaches were actually similar between college and university - this helped the staff connect.	(1) Attainment of articulation students lower than others, more likely to drop out / finish early than others. (2) Belonging, or lack of, is a key component. (3) Academic barriers. (4) Staff engagement could help with social barriers.	(1) Progression data shows big difference in retention into Year 4 depending on entry into either Year 2 (80%) as opposed to Year 3 (66%) (2) Difference in college and university approach to teaching - college is 'spoon-fed'. (3) Socio-cultural barriers, leading to lower confidence levels.	(1) College helped students scaffold / transition into university - it demystified some of the academic challenges and independent learning. Helped prepare and inspire. College staff good for this as they teach both FE and HE. (2) Peer support and connection at college is strong. (3) College helps learners mature.	(1) Challenge of independent learning. Academic standards high, college was overprotected. (2) Year 2 students were getting it. (3) Year 3 starting to belong - but more demand for autonomy, self-direction. (4) Ten years on: importance of staff in supporting students, but the development of critical skills very useful.

> Widening participation is not simply about widening access, but also supporting the integration and success of students who gain access. (Meharg et al., 2017b: 86)

Despite this perceived benefit, several papers identified a lack of alignment between the college and university systems. This is partly historical and related to the purpose of different institutions. Colleges have had an emphasis on 'skill development and lifelong learning' (Mayne et al., 2015: 167), whereas higher education has historically been the focus at university:

> Traditionally, college and university have offered differing teaching models and served the needs of a different community of learners with the focus of further education institutions being on vocational courses and universities on higher education. Articulation routes from college into university demand that these two disparate educational pathways should merge seamlessly[.] (Meharg et al., 2017a: 91)

This disconnect in terms of purpose is enhanced by a disconnect in terms of how things are done. O'Donnell et al. (2018: 30) highlight 'differences between the two sectors in terms of course structure, conventions and rules and demands'. The approach to teaching is often different 'with students describing learning at college as being "spoon-fed", while self-directed study is necessary at university' (Meharg et al., 2017b: 89). Teaching is central to the role of staff in college but 'the research culture, a priority in HE, is not generally a feature of working in FE' (Mayne et al., 2015: 167).

Despite these challenges, there were suggestions that the college and university approaches are starting to align. For example, Mayne et al. (2015: 175) identified a 'shift in educational paradigm from teaching-centred to learner-centred approaches is evident in both sectors, designed to meet the learning needs of an increasingly diverse student population.' This is not the case for all subjects, however. Mayne et al. (2015) found that, in nursing, 'the most commonly identified theme … was that teaching methods, the students themselves and in many ways the educational process were similar across both sectors' (Mayne et al., 2015: 173).

ACADEMIC FACTORS

All of the papers discuss the academic challenges students making the transition from college to university face. This is a significant issue as Meharg et al. (2017a: 95) highlight that articulating students from college 'are less likely to receive a First or 2.1 classification than their continuing counterparts and are more likely to leave with an ordinary degree than progress to the fourth year.'

Part of the academic challenge comes from the differences between the college and university systems (as discussed in the previous section), and the need for students to navigate and 'demystify' these differences. For example:

> the learning environment at university tends to be based on the model of the independent learner. This brings challenges for college students who arrive at university with little experience of managing their own workload, of having limited formal contact time with teaching staff or of undertaking assessed work without active staff input. (Christie et al., 2016: 627)

Students coming from college are often uncertain about 'what was expected of them as independent learners' (Breeze et al., 2020: 25). Tett et al. (2017) describes this as 'learning shock' (Tett et al., 2017: 395), and making a successful transition requires embracing 'the identity of the autonomous learner' (Tett et al., 2017: 399). Students feel that university lecturers are more meticulous 'in terms of adhering to course rules such as referencing, assessment guidance/ deadlines' (O'Donnell et al., 2018: 30) than their college counterparts.

The relationship with staff is a key difference. While support from staff could help in making effective transitions, students perceive university teaching staff as more distant and less approachable than those at college (Breeze et al., 2020; Meharg et al., 2017b).

> Part of the 'surprise' about the reality of independent learning was having to be self-motivated, as studying could be a lonely experience, especially after the high levels of staff interaction in college. (Christie et al., 2013: 631)

The development of relevant academic skills is seen as crucial in making an effective transition to university from college. Some students struggle with 'how to do university learning' (Breeze et al., 2020: 25) such as note taking in lectures or critical thinking. Successful students (Christie et al. 2013; Christie et al. 2016) are those who recognise the need to adapt and learn new skills. A form of 'self-critical reflection' (O'Donnell et al., 2018: 34) is common in successful students, which enables students to identify and critique material they previously would have taken for granted (Tett et al., 2017). Despite various support programmes, summer schools and associate student schemes, the literature suggests that college students still 'showed signs of being behind' (Glen, 2018: 97) those at university when they start the transition.

Academic challenges manifest themselves most obviously in assessment:

> transitional students are required to adapt to a shift in curriculum, accompanied by altered terminology, assessment methods, grading criteria and new expectations of independent learning. (Meharg et al., 2017a: 91)

Students who struggle with assessments at university report not 'knowing or understanding what was expected of them' (Christie et al., 2013: 630). These students worry about the conventions of essay writing and referencing which were 'less important at college' (Christie et al., 2013: 630). Assessments at university are thought to be more demanding:

> the expectation that students studying at higher education would read more widely and more deeply; that assignments would be longer and require evidence of high levels of analytical thinking and the requirement of more independent learning; and, significantly, that higher education gave more autonomy to students. (O'Donnell et al., 2018: 31)

But assessment, and successful engagement with it, can also be a positive for students in transition. Those who make the transition work are found to 'prioritise university study' (Christie et al., 2016: 486) and embrace the idea of independent learning. 'Receiving (good) marks and feedback on course work helped the students to increase their self-confidence' (Tett et al., 2017: 397). Successful students understand the point of feedback 'to improve their performance in future assessment' (Christie et al., 2013: 629).

IDENTITY AND SOCIAL FACTORS

All of the papers discuss the social and emotional aspect of making the transition from college to university. Meeting and connecting with others making that same transition is crucial to share concerns and recognise you are not alone (Breeze et al., 2020: 27). Students have indicated that 'working in small peer groups – outside of formal teaching – preserved their sense of emotional wellbeing' (O'Donnell et al., 2018: 32). Social bonds are also useful in helping meet some of the academic challenges outlined above (Meharg et al., 2017a: 99). Wider support, such as friends and family reaffirming and confirming to students that they 'were doing the right thing' (Tett et al., 2017: 398) is also important.

As indicated above, a further dimension of the students' success was their good time management. Many commentators have documented the plethora of competing commitments faced by (non-traditional) students, and the stress of balancing studying with working and family life (Christie et al., 2013: 629).

Student identity is highlighted in several papers. Some express concerns about students being able to make the transition, particularly in relation to a 'lack of ambition' (Glen, 2018: 93) shown by those in widening participation routes. In contrast, Meharg et al. (2017b: 90) suggest that transition students 'have attributes that may be lacking in continuing students, specifically excitement and enthusiasm'. Both Christie et al. (2016) and O'Donnell et al. (2018) highlight the process of becoming for students making the transition, how they negotiate a way through the experience:

> From this perspective, becoming an independent learner is a dynamic process that occurs within a pedagogical relationship that actively works (or not) to foster the dispositions and qualities that allow the student to engage meaningfully with the curriculum. (Christie et al., 2016: 488)

The process of becoming can, if successful, help students belong at university. This is often a challenge, even with simple things like 'references to first-year content as assumed common knowledge' (Breeze et al., 2020: 26) which undermines transition students' confidence. Successful students seek 'to become acculturated in the teaching and learning styles, and procedures and practices, of the new university environment' (Christie et al., 2013: 634). This enculturation can change perceptions of what university is and is for, and about what it is to be a university student (O'Donnell et al., 2018: 32).

LOGISTICAL FACTORS

A few of the papers refer to 'everyday logistics' and the importance these have on successful transitions from college to university. A new physical environment can be difficult to adjust to (Christie et al., 2013), as can adapting to new travel, study, and IT methods (Meharg et al., 2017a).

> We were struck by the centrality of procedural day-to-day aspects of university life to participants' discussion, given the relative absence of these issues in the literature. Being unfamiliar with the layout of the university building, with how different floors and rooms were numbered and how to find them, was noted as not only confusing and frustrating, but as connected to feelings of not-belonging and not being able to cope. (Breeze et al., 2020: 28)

How to best prepare students for this challenge is less clear, but being on the university campus ahead of the actual transition is seen as a helpful step. Campbell and McAdam (2022: 108) outline a nine-week on-campus programme of activities 'including workshops on academic skills and "taster" lectures on topics relevant to the subject group'. Breeze et al. (2020: 26) argue that students might benefit more from the practical experience of being on campus rather than an induction programme itself, 'especially in terms of transitioning to more autonomous learning'.

DISCUSSION

The literature considered for this study provide rich, detailed and varied perspectives on the lived experiences of students making the transition from college to university in Scotland. We will surface three key, related, points for discussion: (1) Responsibility for Transition, (2) Alignment between Colleges and Universities and, (3) Widening Participation. Our aim is to raise these points to inform ongoing discussion.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR TRANSITION

Our findings highlight a question of responsibility: where does the responsibility for making effective transitions from college to university lie? The papers considered suggest a range of different potential answers.

First, one line of thought in the papers discussed was that it was colleges' responsibility to adapt and align their teaching, engagement and assessment practices to better fit the university environment students transition into. Moving from a system of so-called 'spoon-fed' material with high levels of tutor contact, towards a system that encourages and enables independent learning could help 'demystify' things for students. It could mean that university is less of a 'learning shock'. Second, in contrast, one might see a request in the literature placed on the universities to better support students making the transition from college. Better induction procedures, including access summer schools and preparatory modules, have been shown to be effective in promoting student confidence and performance. Indeed, such 'bridging programmes' have been praised in relevant reports:

> there is good evidence of the positive impact made by academically based programmes which enable disadvantaged learners to supplement their attainment by engaging with university curricula. Examples include academically rigorous summer schools, gateway programmes and top-up schemes. (Scottish Government, 2016: 31)

Associate Student schemes, whereby students at college have access to and interaction with universities and their facilities, have also been shown to be effective. Third, it has been suggested that the SFC and bodies/initiatives they fund have responsibility for ensuring effective transitions. Supporting initiatives, such as that presented by Glen (2018) provide a coherent pathway of

programmes for pupils at school, through to university, with an overarching perspective. The SFC has previously funded additional articulation places to support such measures; although this has increased the number of universities offering articulation 'it has not necessarily led to all institutions viewing articulation as a core activity' (Scottish Government, 2016: 33).

Finally, our findings have surfaced the view that (at least some) responsibility for making an effective transition from college to university rests on the student themselves, and on their attributes and dispositions. Christie et al. (2013) and Christie et al. (2016) both highlight the differences between successful and unsuccessful students coming from college into university, arguing that successful students are more likely to be those who adapt to the different learning environment, are critically self-aware, and come to recognise the importance of independent and self-directed learning.

The intended moves towards an integrated tertiary sector in Scotland should bring the question of responsibility into focus. It is likely that each of the factors considered here is relevant, and so a combined approach to responsibility is required, as recognised in the whole system approach identified in *A Blueprint for Fairness* (Scottish Government, 2016). Indeed, a core recommendation of the National Articulation Forum Final Report (Universities Scotland, 2020) is that colleges and universities have a shared responsibility:

> All Scottish colleges and universities should ensure that appropriate support is in place for all stages of the articulation pathway (pre-transition from college to university, and post-transition) including provision of study skills, academic writing practice, and research skills. (Universities Scotland, 2020: 8)

ALIGNMENT BETWEEN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

To what extent is alignment between colleges and universities feasible, or indeed desirable? Our findings suggest a clear tension for colleges. On the one hand, as we have seen, there is a pressure for colleges to align their teaching practices to that of universities, on the other there is recognition of clear difference in terms of approach, rationale and identity between colleges and universities. Expansion of routes to university may well be a 'real success story of Scottish higher education' (Scottish Government, 2016: 32), but the colleges face a balancing act.

Husband and Jeffrey (2016) state that 'colleges and universities traditionally fill different needs in the post-compulsory education sector and society but articulation in provision and the narrowing of the divide in teaching and learning practice has shown increased convergence in modes of operation and delivery' (Husband & Jeffrey, 2016: 67). This has led to a situation where the:

> increased use of scholarly approaches to teaching, differing concepts of knowledge and a research-based culture present an often stark contrast to the active approach of pedagogic practice more akin to school methodology common within FE. Increased focus on student support (e.g., classroom teaching assistants and learning development tutors), vocational skills development and a teaching-focused paradigm offer a different experience in FE to the traditional scholarly model prevalent in higher education institutions. (Husband & Jeffery, 2016: 68)

Recent movement towards a unified tertiary framework for the assessment of teaching quality may continue the move to align learning and teaching practice across the sectors. Any such move would need to acknowledge the differing missions of the sector and the importance of FE and school-level provision at colleges. It should be noted, however, that almost one-third of full-time equivalent enrolments in Scottish colleges are at HE level (SFC, 2022) and so cross-sector alignment here might be expected. Gallacher and Reeve (2019) suggest that the three main roles for colleges are the provision of vocational education and training, social inclusion and the provision of higher education and articulation. The desirability or possibility of developing a unified model of teaching across these roles within a college, let alone across the tertiary sector, is open to question.

WIDENING PARTICIPATION

As shown above, college to university transitions are frequently described as valuable in relation to widening access to and participation in higher education, and as a vehicle for enabling more 'non-traditional' students to attend university. While there is some truth in these claims demonstrated in the papers considered here, our findings suggest some caution in how this is understood.

We first need to consider what is meant by the phrase 'non-traditional' and whether, in a joined-up tertiary sector it remains a relevant and acceptable usage. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC, 2020a) suggests that 27.7% of university first-degree entrants in 2018 arrived via a college route – it does not seem sustainable that over a quarter of the university student intake should be classified as 'non-traditional' and their transitions to university problematised rather than being seen as 'business as usual'. Widening participation work has been focussed on ensuring that students from 'the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent 20% of entrants to higher education' (SFC 2020b: 10) and, given the demographic profile of students, the college route has been a major way in which universities have sought to meet this target. One of the challenges for building a coherent tertiary sector is ensuring that this becomes an entirely normal (or 'traditional') transition that is supported by the alignment of practices discussed above.

A challenge to the equity of widening participation initiatives is a difference in the relative importance (in terms of numbers) of college-university routes between different types of university. 'Post-92' institutions are more prominent in agreeing articulation routes for college students, and we have seen from our findings (Christie et al., 2013; Christie et al., 2016) a claim of specific and particular challenges for students entering an 'elite' institution. Where articulation agreements do not exist, students often do not receive full credit for their college study, even if it is at SCQF level 7 or 8. In 2019–20, one-third of students entered university via the progression route and so were required to enter year one, thus taking 5 or 6 years to complete an honours degree.

Ianelli (2018) suggests that a lack of willingness to recognise college qualifications fully is down to universities' perceptions of the academic preparedness of college students:

> the reason why some universities (in particular the ancient universities) may not recognise in full, or recognise only in part, prior learning in college is that those students are considered not prepared enough to engage with the content of a second- or third-year degree-level programme. (Ianelli, 2018: 679).

As Husband and Jeffrey (2016) note: 'higher education institutions are bound by their models and requirements for entry, which are designed to maintain exacting standards, ensure the suitability of courses of study for applicants, and maintain the cultural identity and practices of the institutions' (Husband & Jeffrey, 2016: 69). Arguably, in failing to offer an equitable pathway for college students and requiring sometimes financially disadvantaged students to take a longer route to so-called 'elite' study, there is a tension with claims of widening access and participation. The difficulty of accessing high-status institutions limits opportunities for 'non-traditional' students as does the perceived lack of status of college-delivered HE. Husband and Jeffrey (2016) point out that the current model of progression in HE courses from college into university 'emphasises the perceived requirement to attend university for valid HE provision' (Husband & Jeffrey, 2016: 69–70).

This difference in access to 'elite' institutions and the requirement to follow a university route highlights two issues for 'non-traditional' students – their relatively low attendance at high-status institutions and the continued contrast in esteem between college and university education. At first glance it may seem contradictory to argue for increased access to high-status institutions while lamenting the perception of the lower status of the college education, but, as Riddell and Hunter Blackburn (2019) contend, 'fairness will not be achieved until equal proportions of students from different social backgrounds are present in each type of institution' (Riddell & Hunter Blackburn, 2019: 199). Resonating with many of the issues identified in our study, Riddell and Hunter Blackburn (2019) conclude that in Scotland:

> young people from socially advantaged backgrounds are concentrated in high-status universities while those from disadvantaged backgrounds are congregated in colleges. Colleges have been responsible for the vast majority of progress in relation to widening access, but students who find themselves on college courses face many additional barriers compared with their more privileged peers'. (Riddell & Hunter Blackburn, 2019: 199)

In addition to the sectoral, academic and practical barriers outlined above, the vocational and technical nature of much college provision and the focus of widening participation activity in the post-92 institutions may limit choices for 'non-traditional' students. Smith and Duckworth (2022) argue that behind the political promise of widening participation, is a 'skills discourse' that perpetuates divisions between 'academic' and 'vocational' pathways' (Smith & Duckworth, 2022: 25) and guides college students into the latter.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a qualitative research synthesis of studies covering the experiences of students transitioning from college to university in Scotland, and of the staff who support them. It provides a timely summary and analysis of what is known about the Scottish sector as it considers moving to a more coherent tertiary system.

The themes identified included the sectoral, academic, personal and logistical factors which influence making effective transitions. We raised three key questions for consideration moving forward:

1. Where does the responsibility for enabling effective transition lie? We have identified the range of personal, institutional and sociocultural influences in play for transitions from college to university. In moving towards an integrated Scottish tertiary sector policymakers, institutions and individuals should consider their responsibilities within this complex picture, ensuring that pathways into university from college are equitable and effective.
2. To what extent is alignment between colleges and universities possible or, indeed, desirable? The different missions of colleges and universities may mean that a unified approach to learning and teaching is not, in practice, possible. The variety of provision in the college sector, along with the varied academic experience of students, mean that different teaching methods may be required. However, teaching in both sectors is moving towards a learner-centred approach and the examples of successful transitions described here are where students engage in activities, such as critical reflection and independent learning, that are more characteristic of the traditional university approach. Supporting the development of these attributes at all levels of college education may, therefore, be desirable, to support students on their academic journey. In addition, the close alignment of curriculum areas across institutions, in terms of content and teaching approaches, also appears to support successful transition. The expected common outcomes of HE-level study, both in terms of subject knowledge and of student attributes (such as becoming independent learners), mean that this is an area that merits further study.
3. Does the current conception of the college to university transition genuinely widen participation? If Scotland is to move to a coherent tertiary sector, then it needs to ensure that transition from college is seen as a standard route to all universities and subject areas and not just a route to meeting outwardly imposed targets around widening participation. The current system limits the choices of college students (who are, broadly, from less-advantaged areas than their university peers) and concentrates somewhat on vocational subjects outside of high-status institutions.

While our findings, and questions, will have implications for those working in the Scottish sector, we anticipate they will also be relevant to all those considering relationships in, and between, further and higher education.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

Data analysis was performed on previously published articles which are listed in the References and presented in Table 1.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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Both authors were involved in drawing up selection criteria for sources, choice of methods, analysis of articles and authorship of this paper. Both also responded to reviewers' comments.

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