

(Still) Unskilled and Unaware of It?

~~Ramblings~~
Some Thoughts on First Year Transitions in HE

Paul Latreille

Oxford Brookes

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Study / academic skills

“Particular academic abilities that the learner needs as an integral part of their university education but which are not specifically disciplinary, content-based skills or technical knowledge” (McVaugh et al., 2014)

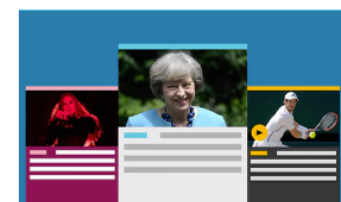
Higher education

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School leavers lack basic skills, say universities

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Universities are dismayed by the poor levels of literacy skills of school leavers who arrive in higher education expecting to be able to write according to a new study.

Tutors at 16 universities - including Oxford and many school leavers lacked a good grip of grammar.

They believe the relentless burden of school examinations and an attitude among students that "if it's important".

The Oxford-based Nuffield Review report, which was published in the Education Supplement, called for reforms to secure better standards.

Focus groups of 250 lecturers and admissions tutors found that large amounts of time were being lost at the beginning of the academic year, ranging from maths to essay writing.

"Remedial maths courses are on offer and the department has a learning officer to help with 'how to learn'," one tutor said.

Another said: "No actual civil engineering is done in the first semester, and the second year material has now moved to the third year."

Comments on written work included: "They cut and paste essays from the web. Reading books is a skill which has been lost."

Writing Matters



The Royal Literary Fund

REPORT

New Higher Education Focus Groups
report

Sarah Wright, Geoff Haywood, Jill Johnson and Richard Skerrett

For more information, please contact

or

Dr Geoff Haywood
Nuffield Review Director
Department of Educational Studies
University of Oxford
15 Norham Gardens
Oxford OX2 6PY
ph: 01865 274007
geoff.haywood@edstudies.ox.ac.uk

Wilde *et al.* (2006)

Assessment burden & “highly instrumentalised and surface approach to learning”

“Learners who may have achieved academic success... at A level... struggle to cope with the more independent and self-directed style of learning expected by higher education tutors”

Need for emphasis on “traditional virtues: the ability to read critically, to communicate ideas in writing... and to argue a case”

Davies *et al.* (2006)

“Students are arriving at university without the basic skills which make coherent written work possible”

“Many students are simply not ready for the demands that higher education is making – or should be making – of them”

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Universities warn A-levels leave students 'unprepared'

By Sean Coughlan
BBC News education correspondent

🕒 3 April 2012 | [Education & Family](#)



Universities want A-levels to be more intellectually stretching and with less spoon-feeding from teachers, according to a study from an exam board.

Cambridge Assessment, which runs the OCR exam board, found many lecturers believed students arrived unprepared for degree-level work.

Three-in-five lecturers said their institutions ran catch-up classes.

Education Secretary Michael Gove has called for greater involvement from universities in A-level standards.



A-level courses should encourage pupils to develop the ability for "independent thinking", say lecturers

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Students are not being prepared enough for higher education, say university admissions officers

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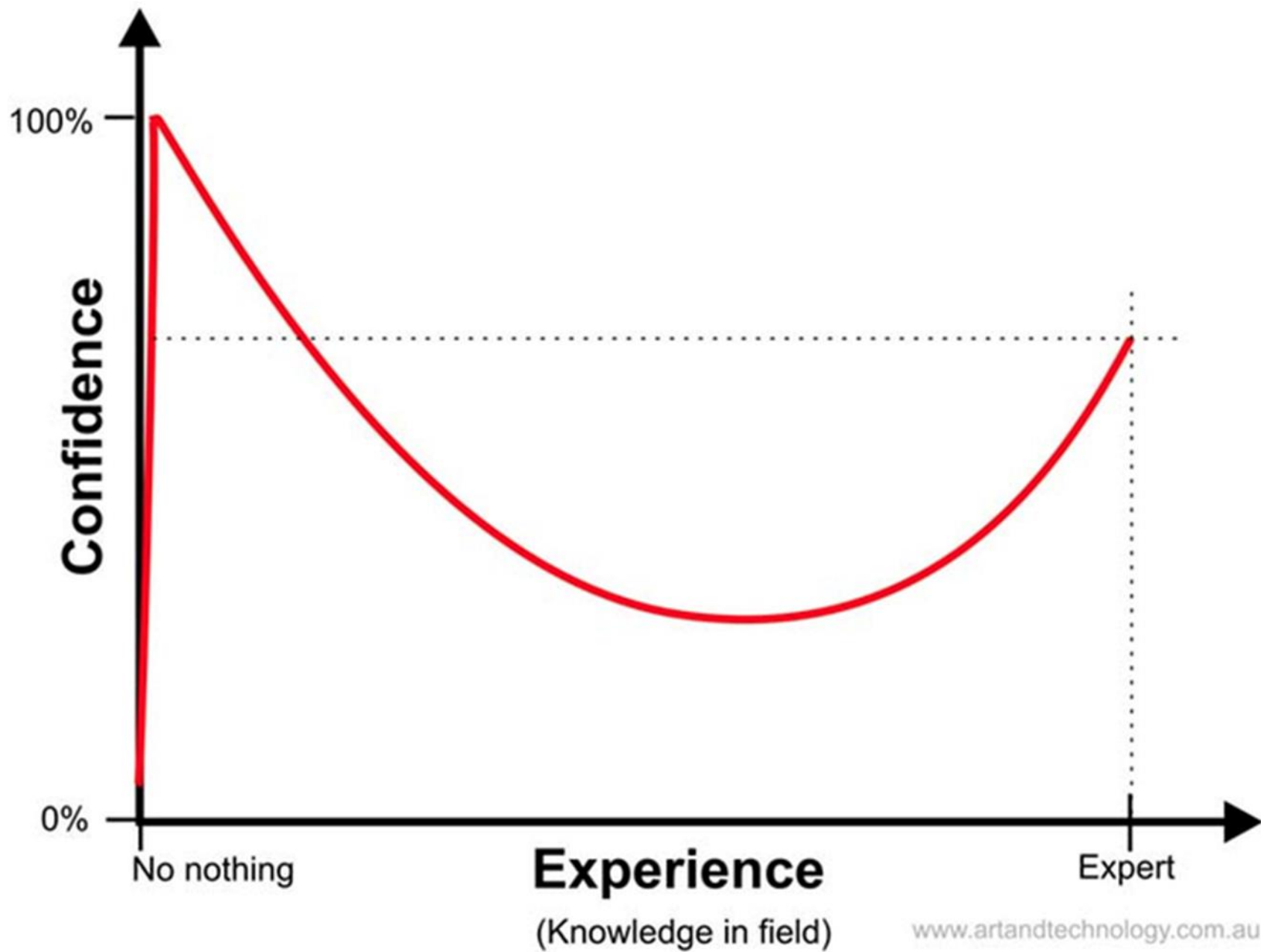


Kruger & Dunning (1999)

Unskilled & unaware

(Kruger & Dunning, 1999)

- Unskilled/incompetent people will:
 - over-estimate their own skill/competence relative to objective criteria
 - be less able to recognise competency/skill (“deficient metacognitive skills”)
 - be less able to judge their own competency/skill by comparisons with others
 - recognise their own competency/skill only through improvements (i.e. improved metacognition via training)



In students' own words...

“Adjusting to the culture of University life takes time and effort due to the considerable differences between the environment of school and my transition into University. During school any work undertaken is subject to close scrutiny and feedback is given in a positive way. At University little guidance is provided on task completion compared to that at school, and several draft copies that would have been acceptable to my teacher at school were no longer an option to my tutors.”

In students' own words...

“Although it is expected that University students can work independently, I was not prepared for the amount of time and commitment this would entail. It would have been beneficial if this point was made clear to me prior to starting my year. I was also unprepared for the sheer volume of reading that had to be completed in a relatively short space of time.”

In students' own words...

“Term times in University are shorter than school, and adjustment into University life had to be relatively quick. Part of my problem was that I struggled to appreciate the nature of these issues and the degree to which they would affect my first year performance... Written work was often difficult to complete because of it's (sic) assessment weighting, and because I had no comprehension of time management, I was left with several pieces of work due at the same time.”

In students' own words...

“I perceived that everyone else knew where to go and what to do. I was the first child in my family to attend University and I was worried about letting them down, and did not want them to know that I was finding it difficult to adjust. I found it particularly difficult during the first few months to seek advice and often felt unsupported and lost. Although adjusting... was more problematic than I could have imagined, I now feel I have the necessary skills to be stronger academically and emotionally.”

Various responses in sector

- Student skills development (units)
- Various models / dimensions:
 - Pre-emptive interventions vs reactive (deficit)
 - Co-curricular ('bolt-on') vs curricular ('stand-alone' vs 'embedded'; credit vs non-credit bearing)
 - Specialist vs academic delivery
 - Emergence of 'blended' model (see below)
- Each has strengths, but received best practice guidance (Cottrell, 2001; Wingate, 2006; McVaugh et al., 2014) is that should be curricular, ideally embedded

An aside in defence of co-curricular

- Evidence suggests it can make a difference
 - e.g. Johnson & Mollekin (2017)
 - Students at TUoS showed 2.42 uplift on confidence on 10 point scale 2015-16 (Johnson & Mollekin, 2017); 92% recommendation rate (n=2229, all levels)
 - Thematic analysis of reflective accounts in HEAR-accredited Academic Skills Certificate showed key themes around confidence, models and frameworks, transferability, and attainment (n=108)

Existing research

- Skills development part of wider transitions literature
 - Gale & Parker (2014)

“different interpretations variously inform policy, research and practice in the field and... despite a growing level of interest in HE, ‘transition’ remains a largely under-theorised concept...”
 - Three broad literatures identified in review:
 - 1) accounts of programs (sic) to assist students, particularly in first year of HE (e.g. Heirdsfield et al., 2008; Hultberg et al., 2009; Kift, 2009; Tinto, 2008))
 - 2) quantitative and qualitative analyses of HE students (e.g. Hillman, 2005; Krause & Coates, 2008; McInnis et al., 1995)
 - 3) theoretically informed conceptualisations of transitions, including those extending beyond formal education contexts (e.g. Colley, 2007; Ecclestone, 2009; Quinn, 2010; Worth, 2009)

A typology of student transition in HE

(Gale and Parker, 2014)

Conceptions of student transition	Transition metaphors	Types of transitional change: from one to another	Transition dynamics	Illustrative transition activities/emphases/systems
<i>Transition as Induction (T₁)</i>	Pathway; Journey; Milestones	Inculcation: sequentially defined <i>periods</i> of adjustment From one institutional and/or disciplinary <i>context</i> to another	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Navigating institutional norms and procedures • Linear, chronological, progressive movement • Relatively fixed structures and systems • Crisis as culture shock (contextual familiarity) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Orientation/familiarisation with campus (facilities etc.) and significant staff • 'Just-in-time' information re procedures, curriculum content, assessment requirements • First-year seminars • Institutionist transition pedagogy (Kift 2009)
<i>Transition as Development (T₂)</i>	Trajectory; Life stage;	Transformation: qualitatively distinct <i>stages</i> of maturation From one student and/or career <i>identity</i> to another	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Navigating sociocultural norms and expectations • Linear, cumulative, non-reversible movement • Discrete, singular, consecutive identities • Crisis as critical incident (identity forming) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentoring programs • Service learning and field placements • Career and research culture development activities/emphasis • Career and research culture development activities/emphasis • Championing narratives of student and career trajectories by successful students and staff • Individualist transition pedagogy
<i>Transition as Becoming (T₃)</i>	Whole of life; Rhizomatic	Fluctuation: perpetual <i>series</i> of fragmented movements Lived reality or <i>subjective</i> experience, from birth to death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Navigating multiple narratives and subjectivities • Rhizomatic, zigzag, spiral movement • Flexible systems/fluid (ephemeral) identities • Crisis as neither period/stage specific nor necessarily problematic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible student study modes, including removal of distinction between full-time and part-time study and min./max. course loads • Flexible student study pathways, including multiple opportunities to change course and enter, withdraw and return to study throughout life • Curriculum that reflects and affirms marginalised student histories and subjectivities • Connectionist transition pedagogy (Hockings et al. 2010)

T₃ recommendations

(Gale & Parker, 2014)

- “creating collaborative and inclusive spaces, in which students are encouraged to share their beliefs, knowledge and experiences;
- developing student-centred strategies, which entail flexible and tailored activities that enable students to ground their learning in something relevant to them as individuals;
- connecting with students’ lives, through subject matter that is relevant to students' immediate lives and/or their imagined roles and identities as professionals;
- being culturally aware, which includes using culturally relevant examples, anecdotes and stories to aid learning, as well as a non-academic frame of reference for teaching (i.e. teaching beyond the academic culture)”

Diverse learners

- Some groups may be particularly ‘at risk’
 - First generation / WP (per quote above)
 - Sheffield longitudinal study of n=40 UG students (Hordósy et al., 2017)
 - Maximum variation sampling; over-representation of those from WP backgrounds; 12 departments
 - Highlights challenges for all students including notions of belonging and of knowing and learning (‘learning the game’)
 - Potential for ‘hidden curricula’ (cf. Gale & Parker, 2014)
 - International students (esp. from more didactic educational cultures); transition needs to be rapid (see Bamford, 2008),
- Many of these students will recognise their lack of skills, but backgrounds may present challenges in responding (knowledge, loss of ‘face’, etc.)

Key features of effective transition support (Whittaker, 2008)

- Coordinated institutional strategy
- Pre-entry support stage
- Longitudinal *process* of induction (emphasis added)
- Timely provision of information and guidance
- Mainstream teaching activity addresses multiple aspects of transition
- Explicit strategies for social transition (inc. within curriculum)
- *Progressive* skills development (emphasis added)

Key features of effective transition support (Whittaker, 2008)

- Collaboration between central support services and teaching staff etc. (inc. 'blended' models)
- Student access to support in a range of formats (qua modes) (again, 'blended')
- Focus on an enhancement cf. deficit model
- Understanding of particular transition issues with different learner groups
- Transition support targeted at all students (cf. only those 'at risk')

Workshop Format

- Interactive,
 - to counter any notion of being a 'regulatory' induction session
- Compulsory,
 - for all PGT students at SUMS, home or overseas
- 40 two-hour workshops held during weeks 3 to 6
 - delivered by the programme director with support from Dissertation Officer (Barry Pierce) and Divisional Directors of Teaching & Learning
- Very favourable feedback
 - over 85% viewed their contribution positively, found the workshop informative and fun
 - no expressions of dissatisfaction





Content themes

- Sheffield University assessment values
 - and guidance on preparing assessed work;
- independent learning
 - its value as a life-skill and recognition in assessments;
- the tutor-student relationship
 - and the role of the tutorial;
- speed-reading articles
 - to extract the essence of theory & findings;
- the beneficial role of referencing
 - (in contrast to being a rule-based constraint);
- critical thinking
 - how to do it

Case studies of other good practice



Conclusions

- Demonstrable need for academic upskilling – but augmentation cf. deficit
- Requires integrated solution in which skills are part of broader processes over [academic journey](#)
- Move towards a more blended approach may be desirable
- Need to find ways to debias *a priori* student perceptions of own competence

Questions/ observations



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