

*Gareth Hughes describes how students are arriving at university less prepared and more anxious than ever before, and how the human givens approach is helping.*

# Transition distress: the big problem facing universities

**UNUSUALLY for me, I was struggling for words. I was at an Icebreaker event – an evening when students who are joining the university have a chance to get last-minute questions answered and meet soon-to-be course mates and flat mates.**

We hold a few of these every year and all of our new first years are invited. I was answering questions about the support available to students and making sure that no one was left sitting alone. As is often the case, many of those who came to speak to me were the parents. This time it was a mother and what she had said had stopped me in my tracks: “He’s very worried about how he’s going to manage because he’s never been food shopping himself before and he doesn’t know if he can do it.”

I had to restrain my initial urge to point out that she was in a far better position to do something about this than me and, after a moment’s hesitation, made what I hope were helpful suggestions about getting in some practice before he arrived. But, in a sentence, this worried mother had encapsulated much of what I’ve been witnessing for the last few years.

Colleagues across the university sector have noticed a sharp decline in the life skills of the students who are coming into higher education. Students are, in general, less prepared for the transition to university than they once were. Unfortunately this has very real consequences for our students and for universities.

It has long been recognised that the transition to higher education can be a stressful experience, often resulting in psychological distress, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, reduction in self-esteem and isolation. Transition has also been found to play a key role in student suicide. These negative emotions are often referred to as homesickness. Research by psychologists indicates that this may be a very natural and common response to being in a new environment and can be explained by something they term “mere exposure phenomenon”: a natural preference for things with which we are familiar. Research psychologists have used this phenomenon to develop preferences in test subjects for certain numbers, shapes and words, and it is regularly exploited by advertisers. There is a reason companies spend so much money on making sure we know the names of their products.

Students who get actively involved in university life tend to settle in more quickly, as the environment becomes familiar. Joining Student Union societies, which help them continue existing hobbies or interests, engaging early with their academic cohort and taking the time to get to know their new surroundings are all activities which improve and speed up the transition process. There have always been some, of course, who struggle more than others and need help to adjust. The human givens approach provides insights into what might be happening for these distressed students.

The transition between home and university often leaves students in an ‘in-between space’, where they lack feelings of security and safety. This is compounded, for homesick students particularly, by the sense that university is a transient experience and, therefore, any new support networks may not survive it. Having been removed from one support network (home), they can be reluctant to put effort into building new networks when they know that these too may be dismantled in the future.

Research has shown that the students most likely to drop out of university tend to identify the new university environment as threatening. Even students still living at home while studying may feel this sense of insecurity, if they feel that they are taking a significant social risk in attending university; so may students with parental responsibilities or other relationships that university life places stresses upon.

During the early weeks of term, students are not only shorn of their previous support but are also often left with long periods of unstructured time, which they may not know how to occupy. They are surrounded by people they do not know and may struggle to give or receive genuine attention from others, to any significant degree. Most students do, of course, make great efforts to make friends in these early days. However, in recent years, my colleagues and I have noticed that some students appear to lack the skills to build new relationships for themselves. Previous friendships may have been facilitated by school and/or their parents. As a result, they seem unable or unwilling to initiate the early stages of relationship building without guidance and reassurance.

Research consistently shows that the transition to university results in feelings of lowered control. Many students report feeling that they are being carried along by an experience in an environment they don’t yet understand. Loss of control is a key component in student depression.

Although university offers the opportunity to engage with a large community, many students find the size of the university and the numbers of fellow students overwhelming and they do not feel a true part of it at all. In the early weeks of the year, feelings of being lost and isolated are common, as many students struggle to build new support networks. Those students from lower socio-economic backgrounds for whom attending university is not a common experience may also find that their previous community begins to reject them – experienced either in subtle shifts in the ways in which people they know well relate to them or in outright ostracism. With students currently having stronger doubts about the value of a degree, given the massive cost, and increased uncertainty about the future in general, they are less clear about the benefits they will gain from university life, to offset against the possible loss of the world they lived in before.

## Less privacy

Far from privacy being enhanced by leaving home (and parental supervision) students, particularly those in halls of residence, will find a reduction in private space. Anecdotally, halls staff find that a significant number of students report feelings of claustrophobia and lack of space and quiet. For mature students, who face competing demands of family responsibility and academic workload, it can be even more difficult to find the space and time to reflect upon and understand their early experiences.

Studying at university involves a significant change in learning styles for many students – from a passive style, in which their teachers provide them with everything they need to know, to an active style, in which they are responsible for finding much of what they need to know by themselves. Many students have simply not been taught active learning skills before arriving at university and consequently struggle to adapt to new academic demands. This can lead some to experience feelings of failure and low self-esteem. Although engagement with their academic programme should provide students with a sense of competence and achievement, if students are emotionally distressed, their ability to concentrate, remember and think creatively will be restricted and their ability to perform academically significantly impaired. Thus their sense of competence will be reduced, their fear of failure increased and any sense of meaning and purpose eroded.

While the risk to emotional health caused by so many emotional needs not being met has always been a strong one in the transition to university, more students are now reporting

feelings of distress and the levels of distress presented seem to be much greater. Just a few years ago, we would have expected to see some students experiencing anxiety-like homesickness symptoms – such as disrupted sleep, tightness in the chest, preoccupation with thoughts of home, agitation or depressed body language. Now, a significant proportion of our students reporting homesickness appear to be consistently exhibiting symptoms of panic, such as hyperventilation, pale skin, uncontrolled crying, trembling and shaking, and an inability to make decisions, concentrate or contemplate taking actions which may help them.

## Fear of failure

In addition, the thoughts and feelings preoccupying these students are not solely concerned with home and a desire to return. For some students this appears to be driven instead by fear of failure, existential crisis about their future life, an inability to understand their own emotional responses and despair that these emotions are occurring at all. Others report, quite firmly, that they have no desire to return home and that they want to make university work but that they just cannot settle and feel constantly distressed.

This is beginning to lead some of us to suggest that we are in fact witnessing a larger and broader phenomenon – which I refer to as transition distress. As the actual demands of transition to university have not changed in recent years, there must be some other reasons that explain why students have recently found it more difficult to manage these challenges to their emotional needs.

My colleagues and I believe the explanations lie in two places. First, the trend for more young people to expect to go to university means that many students are coming from schools that are not used to preparing their students for the transition to higher education. Many of these students drop out of university not because they lack the academic ability but because they do not have key, easily learnable, skills in place before they arrive. This point cannot be made strongly enough – these are academically good students, who, if properly prepared, would ultimately be likely to graduate. It is the lack of preparation that leads to poor academic performance and makes them vulnerable to drop out. In addition, many schools that have traditionally sent students to university have changed their teaching style because, generally speaking, schools are not measured on how well they’ve prepared their students for life after school: they are measured on exam results. As a result, learning in the classroom has become more passive, as teachers concentrate on providing students with everything they need to pass A Level exams.

Second, there has been a change in parenting style which has seen parents doing their best to help their children avoid mistakes, resolve any difficulties they encounter and keep inconveni-

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ent tasks out of their way. This is, of course, not true of all parents but we have observed a significant trend in this direction and it does not seem to be confined to any particular class or group of families. The unfortunate result is a generation of students with good exam results but few coping skills. Halls staff now report that they regularly receive calls from parents across the UK, reporting problems that their children have told them that they are encountering – while their children remain in their rooms, literally yards from the hall office door.

### Using the human givens

We are now conducting research with our students to test our theories and to devise ways of helping students to acquire the coping skills they are lacking (so that transition becomes an easier process). The small steps we have taken so far are already yielding results. Last year we gave a short talk, based on human givens insights, to all our new first-year students. This session focused on raising hope and motivation, helping students to set long- and short-term goals, informing them of the need to acquire key skills, educating them about the impact of emotions on the brain, explaining the process of emotional hijacking and teaching them some quick self-management techniques, including

7/11 breathing.

When asked afterwards, 83 per cent of the students identified this talk as the most helpful part of their overall induction. This year, we are expanding this session so that we can spend more

time talking about emotional needs and we have plans to completely restructure the process our students go through, from the moment they apply to us, so that they can begin acquiring the necessary skills *before* they come to university.

This is crucial for students but also for the university sector. A large body of evidence clearly identifies that improving student wellbeing is key to improving academic achievement, retention, satisfaction and future employability. These are all measures on which universities are to be rated in future. Well-targeted interventions to improve transition could enhance the experiences and achievement of students and help the sector at a time of great uncertainty.

There are a number of traditional approaches to helping students who are experiencing the kind of distress I have been describing – from viewing homesickness as a form of attachment disorder to issuing practical advice. My own approach, prior to training in the human givens approach, was guided by years of received wisdom and is still common practice for many within the university sector. Broadly, I would try to convince the student that what they are experiencing is normal and transient, that they should hang on in there, that they should join societies and try to make new friends and, if at

all possible, they should not go home, as this would make their feelings worse.

Indeed, there is a good deal of support, within the research literature, for these kinds of interventions but whether or not they worked seemed to be very hit and miss. One of my earliest realisations based on human givens insights was that some students were experiencing a form of trance state, in which their rumination was transforming their family home into a perfect idyll, where no problems ever existed and everything was always wonderful. Against this backdrop, their life at university could only pale by comparison. Having tried a number of suggestions I decided to break one of my previous golden rules – I sent them home. It felt like a gamble but doing so returned them to reality and broke their trance. They saw home as it was and remembered the reasons they had gone to university in the first place. They returned more determined to succeed and their emotional distress significantly reduced.

Other students seem affected by a spiral of poor coping skills, which result in high emotional arousal, which in turn reduces their coping skills further, which again raises their emotional arousal. As a consequence, many of these students become trapped in crippling black-and-white thinking, believing that they must either stay somewhere that they hate for years or abandon all hope of ever pursuing the career they want. Rather than attempting to address this with logic, as I might previously have done, I now focus on reducing their emotional arousal and increasing their sense of control. This generally entails teaching them some simple relaxation techniques, explaining the process of emotional hijacking and using the skills they already have and the resources within the university to set some very practical, short-term, positive, achievable and needs-oriented goals. I also assure students that I will in no way attempt to sway their decision about whether to stay at university or not – it is their decision to make: they are in control.

There is no question that I have been able to help more students by taking this approach. However, I wouldn't claim that the problem is cracked. There is still much work to do in improving the support we offer to students and I'm positive that my colleagues and I can become more effective in our responses.

Nationally, it is recognised that the first six weeks of university are key. Most withdrawal from university either takes place during this time or can be traced to events which took place within it (such as falling out with a friend, a poor academic performance, being unable to cook a meal, getting lost or feeling belittled by a lecturer or peer). Dropping out can be a damaging experience for a student, is a real financial loss for a university and could so often be avoided. Using human givens insights we hope to ensure that, in future, more students stay at university, achieve to their potential and enjoy their experience. ■

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