Easing transitions to university - A student-led approach



Dr Carl Harrington, Jade Howard, Joey Hunt, Shania Varshani, Dr Kelly Edmunds & Dr Rebecca Lewis School of Biological Sciences, University of East Anglia, Norwich, NR4 7TJ

Every year, universities welcome many students who are leaving home for the first time. This transition brings several challenges for students, both academic and pastoral which, without appropriate support, can persist throughout the first year of university and beyond. The 2021-22 academic year will see students arriving at university with a vastly different pre-university experience to those who came before them. They will be facing a whole range of new challenges, some known and some yet unknown to both academic staff and the students themselves. To begin to prepare for this, we surveyed our current Level 3 and 4 students, to identify what they struggled with during their transition to university. The survey was written in collaboration with three current Level 3 and 4 students (authors JH, JH and SV). Here, we present some of the key results from this survey. This student-led approach will identify areas where our current transitions support should be strengthened, allowing us to assemble a 'transitions toolkit', helping our students to get the most out of their university experience



Figure 1: Responses to three survey questions issues to level 3 and 4 students studying a science subject. a) How did you feel when you began university?; b) What emotions were most prevalent during semester 1? and c) What were the most significant factors affecting your mental health during the academic year?

In July 2021, a survey was sent to all Level 3 and 4 students across the Science Faculty. By 13/08/21, 56 students had responded. Figure 1 shows the responses to three of the survey questions regarding the emotional wellbeing associated with the transition to university. Students described their mental health and wellbeing declining substantially during the 2020/21 academic year.

The greatest concerns for students, pre-arrival at university were (in order) managing the workload, staying motivated, meeting academic expectations and time management with all of these scoring > 3.5 out of 5 for the level of concern. Student level of concern for each of these categories fell by just 0.1 for each of these most concerning categories by the end of their first year, suggesting that there is far more to be done in supporting students in these areas.

Student transition is typically thought of as a short-term consideration, for students starting university. Our research highlights that student transition support must persist much further into their first year of study. During 2020/21 at least, concerns present prior to beginning university study were no less concerning to students at the end of the first academic year of study. Regular signposting of support first advertised to students at the beginning of term is important. However, when asked to provide advice to new students, responses were generally very positive, incluiding 'Relax' and 'Be open to trying new things'.