

Facilitating the transition: Doing more than bridging the gap between school and university geography

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Facilitating the transition: Doing more than bridging the gap between school and university geography

This paper explores issues, perceptions and experiences related to the transition from studying geography at school to university. The findings seek to highlight that there are a range of stakeholders that can be engaged in this transition process, as well as a range of strategies for doing so. The transition from school to university geography has a number of implications for both students and educators, and this paper seeks to discuss reinvigorate discussions around transitions in the geographical community.

Keywords: transition; schools; universities; collaboration; communication

Introduction

The transition from studying at school or college to university is widely acknowledged to be a significant step for students, but one which offers considerable challenges to all the parties involved (Briggs, Clark and Hall, 2012, Barron and D'Annuzio-Green, 2009; Keup and Barefoot, 2005). While it may seem obvious that there are roles for both schools and universities in order to facilitate this transition, there are other stakeholders who can contribute too including subject associations, exam boards, government organisations, as well as students themselves.

The issue of student transition to university is on the radar of many stakeholders involved, evidenced by some university geography departments offering taster learning days or conferences for A Level students, learned societies holding 'bridging the gap' days to learn what it is like at university (RGS, 2016), and some discussion from some academics in the discipline (Miller and Brace, 2012, Tate and Hopkins, 2013; Tate and Swords, 2013), to

mention just some examples. In the UK, reform of GCSE and A Level qualifications, which in part sought to ensure there is a clear progression of learning between education stages has prompted involvement from a range of stakeholders to comment on and shape the content of geography qualifications, as the qualifications continue to be taught and the subject of geography develops it is important that communication between these stakeholders is maintained.

This paper makes three key contributions: first it considers how the reform of A level geography in the UK may provide a changing landscape of secondary geography education in which to consider transitions, second it provides insights to perspectives on the transition from students, teachers and academics; and third it highlights a range of strategies considered useful for addressing the transition. Through these discussions the paper seeks to reinvigorate discussions and open up debate around how to facilitate student transitions to universities, the roles of different stakeholders in doing so and strategies for ensuring a continued dialogue around the transition between stakeholders.

The Transition – Academic Discussions

The transition between learning in a school and a university environment is seen by many as a significant challenge for many reasons including, different learning styles, teaching methods, and much broader subject content (Briggs, Clark and Hall, 2012). There is a growing discourse around how students can be supported in the transition as many universities recognise the need to support their students as they enter the university learning environment, and in potentially improving the overall student experience.

The importance of understanding the experience of transition between school and university is key for all subjects, as the process presents academic challenges, personal and social challenges, administrative challenges and even academic challenges (Perry and Allard, 2003;

Scanlon, Rowling and Weber, 2007; Wilcox and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Watts and Patterson, 1997). Arguably all of these aspects go beyond the disciplinary boundaries of geography, but equally it is can be argued that a discipline specific approach to considering the transition may enable the process to take place more smoothly, and in turn create more 'transition aware' educators and learners.

This transition is part of the process developing a learning identity where students have to make adjustments include making connections between pre-university experience and experience at university (Perry and Allard, 2003), which can be enhanced by the opportunity to form positive social relationships with other students and staff (Keup and Barefoot, 2005). This can begin with visits to higher education institutions and contact with current student, which enables school students to imagine what being a student would be like and continues in the early months of university (Harvey and Drew, 2006).

The issues of transition between school and university has been discussed broadly education literatures, but it is argued that the topic is still largely under conceptualised, and under researched (Gale and Parker, 2014). This is particularly important given that its interpretations variously inform policy, research and practice in the field and that despite a growing level of interest in higher education. While there have been efforts from geographers to consider the transition, more generally there are even fewer attempts to address the transition from a subject specific perspective.

Bryson (1997) discusses how first year tutorials can integrate reflective exercises in order to break out of the A level effect, highlighting that learning activities at university can be less structured than students might be used to in the school environment. Imrie and Cowling (2006) demonstrate how partnerships between schools and HE institutions can be established. Hill and Jones (2010) highlight the importance of sustainable partnerships between

individuals across education stages supported by institutions, local authorities and subject associations, and Jeffrey (2010) reflects on how teacher conferences organised by a geography department at university can facilitate interactions between educators at schools and universities. Richardson and Tate (2012; 2013) also discuss how extended induction periods can be used as a method to facilitate the transition.

As Tate and Swords, (2013) highlight, the issue of transition often appears in waves, with some of the most recent waves being brought to the fore by not only an increase in university places, a focus on widening participation, and reform of school qualifications. The discussion has become renewed with studies which examine student perspectives of the transition, but also the use of social media platforms to engage students prior to geography degree courses (Tate and Swords, 2013). A key recommendation from this work is that there should be greater collaboration between teachers and lecturers which would not only raise awareness of the subject content taught at both levels but the pedagogical methods strategies used too.

Tate and Swords (2013) highlight in their study of student perceptions that some students are not concerned as much about the transition in terms of subject content in geography, but more about the different skills required to study for a degree. They stress that academics should develop greater awareness of what it is like to study at school (beyond the content of the subject), that academics should develop more links with other stakeholders involved in secondary education, and that efforts to support the transitions should have a broader focus than the subject content but to focus on the skills too.

Further discussion from the geographical community around these issues took place in 2011-12 Higher Education Academy (HEA) Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES) group which established a special interest group to consider not only the transition to university, but between year groups and out of university too (Tate and Hopkins, 2013).

These discussions produced a series of examples of good practice related to transitions, including: extending induction, induction fieldwork, from when they receive results peer mentoring, student handbook, creating online spaces and social networking, teaching critical reading and writing, opportunities for reflection. This working group provided an opportunity for shared experiences and ideas about how to support transitions, but also identified the need to share examples of good practice.

Focusing particularly on the issue of quantitative skills in geography a further effort from academics through activities with the HEA touched upon issue of transition, focusing particularly on the varied level of preparedness for quantitative methods (Souch, Fitzpatrick and Harris 2014). There appeared to be lack of understanding across secondary schools teachers and higher education institution instructors around student's preparedness in quantitative methods. At the same time those in secondary schools stressed there was no clear message about what quantitative skills were necessary to be taught; instead the pressure was on high grades. A clear conclusion was there needs to be greater communication between the higher education and secondary sector to better understand the demands of each. It also points to a strength in the geography community for doing so as 'geography has a strong track record of peer support, knowledge sharing and enhancing pedagogic goals through institutions such as the GA and RGS-IBG (Souch, Fitzpatrick and Harris, 2014:9). Once again the authors highlight that it will be important to disseminate examples of good practice and initiatives that have had a positive impact.

The efforts by those involved with the HEA activities represent some of the most substantial efforts to consider the transition from school to university with a specific focus on geography, yet there is room for continued investigation and dialogue around these issues within the geographical pedagogical literature. Existing studies around the transition identify the need for greater collaboration of those in schools and higher education around the content taught in

schools as aspect of the transition, and the recent reform of GCSE and A Level Geography has to some extent facilitated this.

Changing Geography Landscape

The landscape of geographical education in schools is changing as educational reforms have led to changes in teaching content and assessment at both GCSE and AS/A level. In 2013 a subject advisory panel for geography, the A Level Content Advisory Board (ALCAB), comprised of academics, teachers, and subject association representatives. ALCAB was tasked with the responsibility of reviewing the content of the A levels to be able to recommend changes where required in order to ensure content of the qualifications adequately prepared students for studying the topic at university (ALCAB, 2013). A key motivation for establishing ALCAB was that reformed qualifications would more accurately represent the subject, which would in turn facilitate a more logical learning transition from school to university. The panel made a number of recommendations which impacted the final Department for Education guidelines on subject content at A Level content (DfE, 2014), and Ofqual subject level and conditions and requirements for geography (Ofqual, 2015b).

It was identified that in order to adequately prepare students who go on to study geography and related subjects at university there should be 60% core content (including global systems and governance; changing places; landscape systems, and water and carbon cycling), that there should be a balance between human and physical geography, and there should be opportunities for students to undertake some independent investigative and research work (including fieldwork) (Ofqual, 2015a). New specifications for geography have been produced by the exam boards around these instructions. It was intended that that the new specifications for geography taught in schools would not only provide a more up to date reflection of geography as a subject but that they would also be comparable between exam boards.

It has been recognised that for some school teachers there may be new content which they are less familiar teaching, and in response there has been a range of different support activities organized by exam boards and learned societies, in the form of teaching resources and training events. The reform of these qualifications has implications not only for the students and teachers at school, in adapting to a new specifications and examination requirements, but for universities as the new entrants become equipped with different knowledge base and skills sets than they may do in the present environment. This reform has to some extent has prompted increased engagement between the two education stages, not only through the ALCAB, but through the training events organized, and subject forums established by some of the exam boards as well. It will be important moving forward for these links to be maintained and extended in order to develop stronger links between universities and schools.

Investigating the Transition: Methods

The starting point for the research presented here was a desire to understand more about what different stakeholders thought about the transition in geography; who was seen as holding responsibility for aiding this transition, and ultimately what strategies can be employed in order to facilitate it? The study involved a survey with 35 teachers, 92 students and 21 academics, as well as in-depth interviews with 28 students. It sought to explore perceptions and experiences of the transition between school and university geography, as well as examine strategies currently being used to facilitate this transition.

Perceptions and Experiences of Geography at University

The starting point for this study was a desire to understand more about not only how different stakeholders approach the transition but different perspectives of it, and whose responsibility it should be to assist students in this period in their education. A survey was conducted with

students who read geography at university before the students started their course, and then afterwards to glean insights into perceptions of what would geography be like at university, against their actual experience. Table 1 displays quotes which reveals some of these perceptions and experiences which broadly focused around five key issues: the experience of geography at university; teaching styles; study skills; geography specific skills; subject content; and opportunities.

TABLE 1 HERE

A common response which emerged from these surveys was that students felt that geography as a subject became much broader at university, expanding into a wealth of topics, many of which they weren't aware of when at school, or would not necessarily have associated with geography. This is not surprising as many geographers herald the breadth of the discipline as one of its strengths as it bridges across social sciences, humanities and the physical sciences. At the same time this seen by others as a weakness as many aspects of the subject can be found in different disciplines from sociology, business, anthropology, political science to geology and geophysics. What is perhaps more of a concern is that it was felt by some students that they didn't see how some of these topics fitted together. One student illustrated this.

FIGURE 1 HERE

The student explained how they felt learning at university was very compartmentalized, that each topic was very divided, and that even though there were exams which were explicitly designed to bring together knowledge from different areas of the A level, this itself felt like its own little compartment of geographical knowledge. Then on reaching university and being handed the handbook for the courses that were available it was like a whole new world, a mix of the familiar, and new; at the same time the options still felt like little blocks building up to

a degree. The student reflected at the end of the degree that if they had known more about the various areas of geography in more depth they could have made more strategic choices about the modules they chose in order to shape the kind of geographer they wanted to be. Relating this to the area of transitions, what became clear in this interview and several others was that what students wanted was awareness of the different areas of geography earlier on in their educational pathways so they could make more informed choices. This was summarized by another student:

'In my first year I had modules that were compulsory and these were fine, and then picked modules with interesting titles, I didn't know much about them at the time. Looking back I wish I had focused more on the social cultural geography ones rather than trying to do a mix of physical and human geography modules. I like physical geography, but I just think I could have had more opportunities to really display a strong interest in cultural geography which is where I want to continue in my work life.'

Comparison of undergraduate curricula across a number of universities in the UK reveals a wide diversity of module topics across both physical and human geography. While this breadth is arguably a key strength of the subject, for some students this may be overwhelming, suggesting more needs to be done to communicate the variety of subject content within geography. Most university departments are likely to argue that they do currently this, and examining university websites suggest they do make it clear efforts to provide information about the different modules. The issue then is perhaps more about awareness of the breadth of the subject prior to studying at university.

Responsibility for the transition

While the transition to university clearly involves schools and universities, the survey results suggested that there is a mix of perceptions about where this responsibility should be held, incorporating a wider group of stakeholders (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2 HERE

For all three groups, responsibility to aid the transition should also be partly assigned to the students themselves, who it was highlighted should make efforts to research what university geography is like, through research online, open days and reading. A role for subject associations was highlighted too. The Royal Geographical Society has held two sessions that are advertised as ‘provides sixth form students with a feel for what studying geography at university level is like’ (RGS, 2016) replicating a ‘geography environment’, and their Geography Ambassador programme where university geography students visit schools was often mentioned in interviews as a very useful way to introduce school students to geography at university. All three groups saw a role for exam boards and government organisations.

What was revealed in many interviews was that participants from all three groups thought that not only should there be shared responsibility for aiding this transition, but that there should be mechanisms whereby representatives of all these groups could collaborate on strategies to do so. While there have been many activities which bring together representatives from some of these groups, either through exam board subject forums, meetings over qualification reform, or lecturers visiting schools they appear to many of the participants in this research as ad hoc, and therefore there needs to be clear mechanisms for these groups to communicate and collaborate in a form that can be sustained over time.

Strategies

Beyond the issue of responsibility this research tried to tease out different strategies being utilised to address the transition in geography. Responses in this case indicated a range of strategies used by different groups in order to begin to address different elements of the transition.

Firstly, school and university collaboration was seen as key by both schools and universities. Included, and related to this is the need for more guest lectures and outreach activities from universities to bring geography at university to the classroom, and for greater teacher-lecturer communication. Many departments are already successful at doing this, while others efforts remain sporadic or not as co-ordinated, or well advertised in order to reach maximum impact. It was also felt that these activities tended to favour schools in central urban locations while schools in smaller towns further from universities failing received less attention.

Secondly, and related to this was a demand for universities to engage more with cohorts prior to the start of the course. Again, there have been efforts to do this as highlighted by the HEA report (Tate and Hopkins, 2013), increasingly so with the use of social media in order for students to engage with their soon to be peers, as well as academics in the department. Thirdly, there was a call for more CPD opportunities for lecturers on the state of geography in schools. Fourthly, it was identified by academics that students should have the opportunity for more seminar style teaching within the school environment, where readings were set and discussions would focus around them. This, it was suggested, would allow students to be familiar with this form of teaching style. However, discussions with teachers indicated that often A level teaching class sizes are around that which would be experienced in a seminar, and already do use readings and discussions as a method to explore many topics. This reinforces the suggestion that perhaps there needs to be greater awareness from staff in higher

education not only about the content that is covered in secondary schools, but also the form that this takes, or greater communication to students about the different learning environments.

The fifth issue was a call from teachers and academics for the opportunity for students to conduct more exciting research projects in school as part of their geography education. Some students pointed to the opportunity to undertake the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) which allowed them to explore some of their interests, more than was allowed in their other qualifications, but highlighted that because this was independent they didn't get the support around research methods and techniques they felt were needed to explore some issues. Although it was acknowledged that this provided good experience of conducting independent research.

The sixth issue focused on reading, and the importance of students being encouraged to do more than just around the topic, but be involved in reading groups in school to encourage students to not only read more frequently, but to read critically and begin to develop the questioning skills needed for their work in higher education. A related, and final point, identified a need for students at schools to be aware of a broader range of materials that geographers need to engage with, more than text books and case study notes provided by teachers including, primarily work stemming from up-to-date academic research: journal articles, working papers, think tank reports and academic books. While many teachers cited frustrations over a lot of academic work only being available through expensive subscriptions to journals, increased efforts around open access may address some of this,

The strategies highlighted here are not groundbreaking, nor is this list exhaustive, but they point to some ways in which different actors and institutions related to this transition stage of education in geography can engage with the process, and begin to contribute. There are however, a number of barriers for developing activities related to the transition which while not surprising, should be acknowledged, including time, resources and funding, awareness, and knowing where to start. What is needed next is a more in-depth investigation in to examples of best practice where any of these strategies are being carried out, in order to develop wider understanding of the experience of transition, but where strategies put in place are most effective.

Conclusions

This paper endeavored to revitalise discussions around the transition experience for students between secondary school and higher education in geography. Drawing on research with a range of students, teachers and academics the article highlighted that while the differences between geography at school at university and school are acknowledged, the perceptions and experiences of the different stages indicate that more work is needed to inform secondary students about what geography is like at university, as a subject. Given the student knowledge of what constitutes geography appears variable there are questions over what higher education institutions can do to address this.

A range of stakeholders are involved with students as they make the transition from school to university, and perceptions of whose responsibility it is to support them vary, suggesting that perhaps a more coordinated approach would be beneficial. A key point that emerged from these findings, echoing previous studies (Castree, 2011; Hill and Jones, 2010; Imrie and Cowling, 2006; Jeffrey, 2003; Stannard, 2003; Tate and Swords, 2011) was that

communication and collaboration between education stakeholders is vital. There is an opportunity to promote the breadth of the discipline, but also ensure a smooth transition in terms of expectations of what the subject involves. Despite interested in the concept of student transitions more broadly, as well specifically in geography, the field remains under-conceptualised and research into the process is mainly small-scale, as has been illustrated here (Briggs, Clark and Hall, 2012; Gale and Parker, 2014). What is needed now is a more comprehensive assessment of student experiences of the transition and strategies undertaken to assist them.

While the reform of school geography qualifications has prompted increased communication between stakeholders at both secondary and university geography levels, it will be important in the future to maintain these connections and build new ones, to ensure that as the subject of geography develops that the understanding of the demands of each education stage are properly understood. The nature of geography as a subject means that it is always changing and developing, and to ensure a smooth transition of students between school and university a dialogue between the two stages needs to be maintained.

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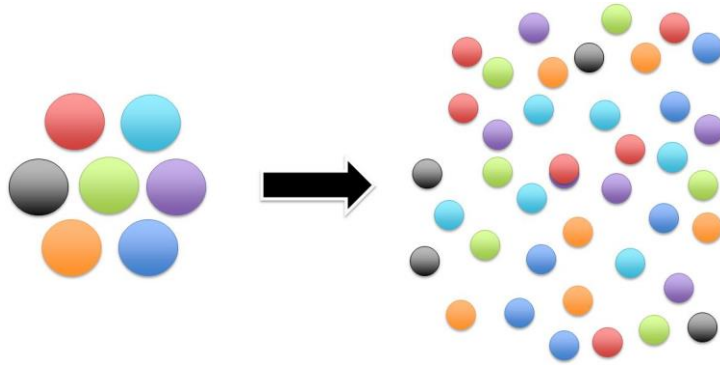
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Table 1: Perceptions and experiences of geography in higher education

Category	Perceptions	Experiences
Experience	<p>‘Like school geography but more choice’</p> <p>‘I expect it to be harder’</p> <p>‘I suppose I’m actually going to have to read more’</p>	<p>‘It was so different from school, not what I expected, so much better’</p> <p>‘It was like my A level was a springboard to the subject’</p>
Teaching Styles	<p>‘Different ways of being taught’</p> <p>‘Huge lectures’</p>	<p>‘More focus on individual learning, lectures and then reading, and more reading, and sometimes seminars.’</p> <p>‘Lectures used as a starting point for reading’</p>
Study Skills	<p>‘I suppose I’m going to spend a lot of time in the library, or actually may be in the labs, or probably at my desk in my room’</p>	<p>‘There was a lot of reading, I mean A LOT of reading.’</p>
Geography specific skills	<p>‘We’ll get to use more equipment in fieldwork’</p> <p>‘I have no idea what kind of fieldwork we are likely to do. I suppose it depends on the lecturer’</p>	<p>‘I learnt how to use GIS properly’.</p> <p>‘I never knew about lake coring before, this was a lot of fun’.</p>
Subject content	<p>‘I assume there will be more topics at university, with more detail about the ones we learnt at school too’.</p> <p>‘There’s bound to be something on volcanoes...I hope there’s something on volcanoes’.</p>	<p>‘There was so much more choice than I expected’.</p> <p>‘I had to learn a lot more for each module’</p> <p>‘It was nice to learn more about topics than just endless case studies’.</p> <p>‘I had to learn loads more about methods – I didn’t do any traffic counts, tally charts or land use maps.’</p>
Opportunities	<p>‘Get to learn about different areas of the subject’.</p> <p>‘Geography with more science- they have labs and lots of equipment’</p> <p>‘A chance to do lots of fieldwork’</p>	<p>‘I got to really focus on what I wanted to learn about.’</p> <p>‘I had to learn about a lot of theoretical stuff for some modules which was new to me.’</p> <p>‘I got to see more of the world, but also an opportunity to understand more about what was going on in it’</p>

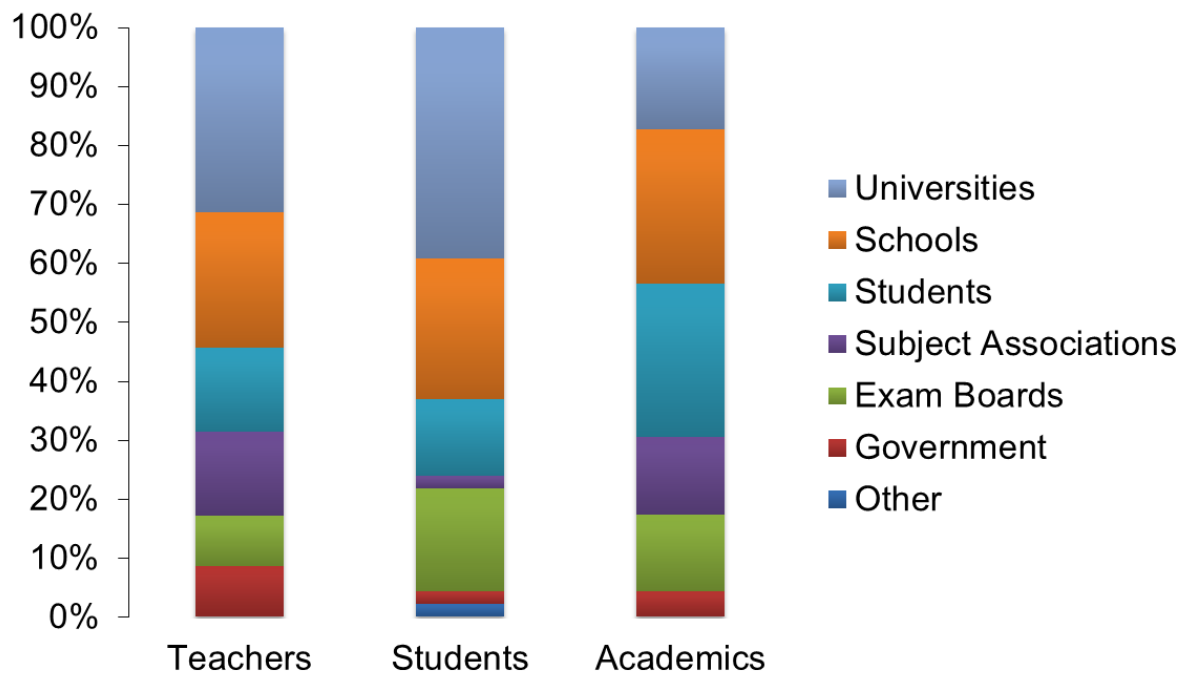
Source: Author

Figure 1: Different worlds of geography



Source: Author's replication of student diagram.

Figure 2: Responsibility for aiding student transitions to university



Source: Author