

Transforming transitions: learning and researcher developers and a whole-institution approach to successful transition

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Presentation abstract

The impact of Covid-19 on incoming students and researchers is plain: students and researchers were denied access to their usual educational experiences, to their usual networking and social interaction, and to their usual assessment types. This resulted in an incoming cohort of students and researchers with higher levels of anxiety and, often, less awareness of the requirements of higher education/research. Recognising the need to engage with new students and researchers in innovative ways, the Student Learning Development (SLD) team and the Researcher Development (RD) team undertook two institution-wide projects to provide students with a 'world-changing' start to their studies. In particular, we sought to engage with the competencies of online study and research skills, academic integrity in an online world, academic community building, and student/researcher confidence.

As we move out of the emergency response to the pandemic (Bartolic et al., 2021; Yowler et al., 2021), both teams have adopted these projects as core elements of work and as particular highlights of the value of LD and RD to the institution. The relationship between LD and RD varies greatly within institutions. Some universities do not differentiate between the roles, some work within the same team, and others work entirely separately. While the two teams are situated separately at the University of Glasgow, the teams work closely together to provide an integrated response that provides continuity of experience for our students and our researchers.

For our undergraduates, a new course – T2G: Transition to Glasgow – was created by SLD. Designed around developing competencies, instilling academic identity, and easing the transition to formal education, the course provided students with the skills required to succeed. For our postgraduate researchers, a new course – PGR@Home – was created by RD. Designed around integration and developing competencies, the course offered asynchronous and synchronous opportunities for research students to begin the process of joining the university community in their new role. In each case, students were contacted directly with information and promotion material on the available initiatives and participated on a voluntary basis. They were able to select from a range of topics that interested them, and also completed a core academic literacies module. For students who completed T2G by completing the required coursework, we granted an exemption for a first-year compulsory writing course. As the courses were pilots, PGT students were not included in either piece of work, but reflecting on each project has enabled us to develop plans to expand and tailor our provision to meet the demands of our PGT students.

This joint case study presented and reflected on the ways in which we adopted a whole-institution response to the transition to new stages of learning and research. The case study highlights the ways in which Learning and Researcher Development teams can offer a transformational transition experience for our students and researchers (Cage et al., 2021; Thompson, Pawson and Evans, 2021), and provides evidence of impact through evaluation and analysis.

Keywords: student transition; institutional collaboration; academic literacies.

Community response

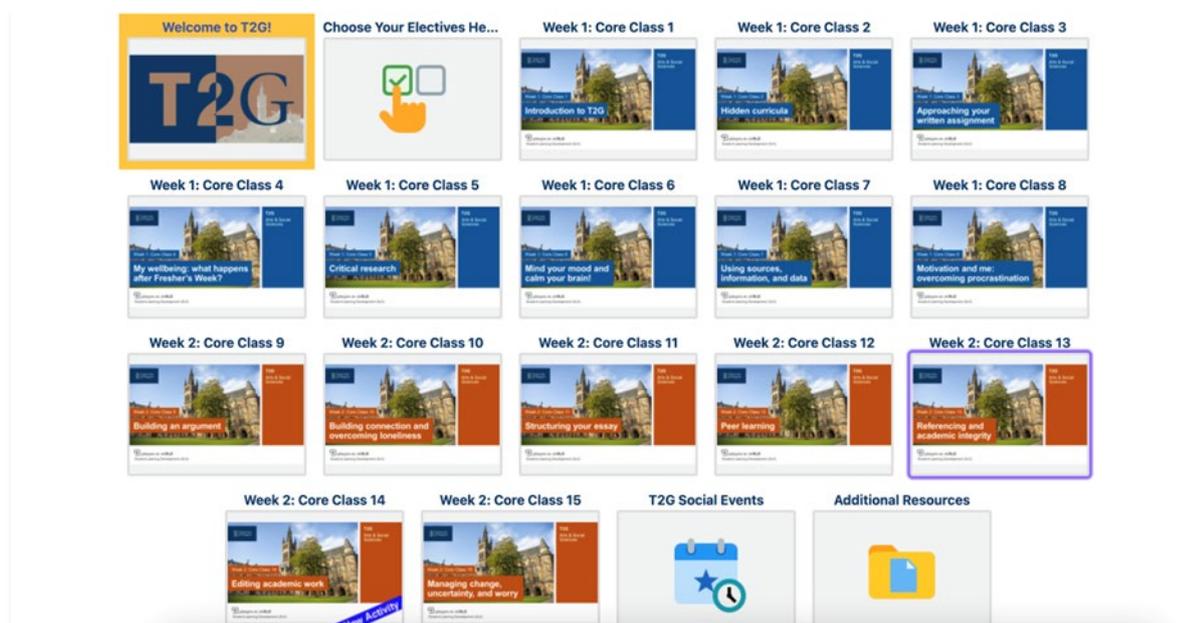
The speakers presented a joint project between the University of Glasgow's Student Learning Development (SLD) and Researcher Development (RD) teams. The project addressed the increased anxiety and reduced awareness of academic requirements of incoming students and researchers caused by Covid-19. The study discussed various methods to ease the transition to university, including providing academic and social acclimatisation, inducting students at various levels, embedding meaningful/authentic

initiatives, utilising broad experiences of Learning/Researcher Developers, and successful transition through a crisis.

The project team developed two new courses for undergraduate and postgraduate students to tackle the mentioned issues. Several noteworthy aspects of this project make it commendable.

- The collaboration of two separate SLD and RD teams gives students and researchers an extraordinary and impactful start to their academic journey, which is praiseworthy. They dedicated their efforts to undertake two institution-wide projects to provide students with a ‘world-changing’ start to their studies.
- The undergraduate course covers a unique mixture of academic literacies, mental health and wellbeing, and discipline specific teaching. Upon completing the pre-entry course, students receive credits that replace one of their compulsory first-year modules. This incentive encourages participation and enforces the value of the content covered in this optional course as an integral part of the student’s academic journey.

Image 1. The undergraduate course covers a unique mixture of academic literacies, mental health and wellbeing, and subject-aligned teaching.



- The University of Glasgow proved its dedication to its students' wellbeing and academic achievement by responding to the pandemic challenges. The Learning and Researcher Development teams were integral in facilitating a transformative transition experience for students and researchers. Their innovative courses provided valuable support for those adapting to the new educational environment. This highlights the significant value of this collaborative project in ensuring a successful academic journey for all involved.

The attendees acknowledged the significance of the initiative and the exemplary resources developed by the two teams at the University of Glasgow. However, they raised a question about the feasibility of adopting this initiative by other institutions with less well-resourced services and the challenges they might face in establishing something similar to the University of Glasgow. They would appreciate the authors' insight into the challenges and how they overcame barriers to secure such valuable resources at an institutional level. Other institutions seeking to improve student support systems can gain valuable insights into the strategies used by the University of Glasgow to build the case for such provision to support their undergraduate and postgraduate students' transition.

This incredible initiative rests on an exemplarily resourced LD team – less well resourced services would struggle to achieve something this ambitious. I'd be very interested in learning more about how Andrew and his team built the case for such well-resourced provision within his institution!

Authors' reflection

The community pointed out the challenges that smaller, less well-resourced institutions might face in adopting or establishing similar initiatives, and how they might overcome barriers at an institutional level.

On reflection, we felt that one key factor here was reputation. The Student Learning Development team has an established history as a source of expertise on learning and teaching, and their guidance is frequently sought by colleagues in the Colleges, Professional Services, and those at senior management level. As a result, there is little – if

any – resistance evident when proposing and piloting new schemes, and interventions are perceived as both positive and of a high standard. A track record of engaging with institutional priorities and goals, and delivering projects with success, allowed for institutional confidence in our abilities to design, develop and deliver such work.

Similarly, the Research Services Directorate team also immediately sought to establish relationships with Colleges and Services to gain support for the immediate project plans and a longer-term staggered approach to induction. The Research Development Specialist, new in post at that point, took a strategic approach to relationship building, establishing connections, listening to concerns, and offering solutions and provisions. This approach proved fruitful, winning not only immediate support, but building longer-term relationships and establishing a reputation, ensuring a positive reception for other projects.

The process of building a case for our initiatives relied heavily on alignment with key pillars of our university strategies. Our Learning and Teaching Strategy and our Student Experience Strategy both challenge the institution to improve the induction and transition experiences for our students through bold, innovate projects. This alignment with university strategy and senior management vision is crucial to building the business case for such projects. For less well-resourced teams, we'd encourage this form of active engagement with strategy, vision, and university mission: placing the work of Learning Development at the heart of how the university can enact strategy is central to securing this type of funding.

The final crucial element in building this type of initiative is partnership working. We worked in partnership and collaboration with staff from across the institution: from our Schools and Colleges, from our marketing and recruitment teams, and from our counselling and psychological services teams. This partnership allowed for an expansion of vision and scope – e.g., incorporation of health and well-being sessions – without further impact on resourcing. Staff from across the institution gave their time to the project because of the importance of the work and its engagement with, as mentioned above, university strategic goals.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to all the contributors who shared their reflections and enriched our insight into this conference presentation and its impact on the audience. Special thanks go to Dr Helen Webster from the University of Oxford for her engaged, thoughtful comments.

The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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