THE IMPACT OF TRANSITION UPON MILITARY STUDENTS

Andrew Moreman and Hilary Fabian
Glyndŵr University

Abstract

This paper reviews the practicess in place within a military college to aid the transition process. Data were gathered from students on an Aircraft Maintenance course, using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and from an institutional literature search. Although no formal college transition policy could be located it was found that there were some processes in place including arrival and pre-arrival briefs, the allocation of a single point of contact, inter college communication, and movement with friendships in tact. The paper concludes that there are several ways to improve transition within the college, including the introduction of a Transition Coordinator, extending the current families 'open day' as a transition activity, better grouping of students at the feeder college to allow for formation of friendships, implementing a formal mentoring scheme and educating staff about the impact of transition upon student performance.

Introduction

Current literature reflects that an effective transfer and transition policy aids student orientation, retention and promotes learning (Fabian, 2002; Galton, Gray & Ruddock, 1999). However, there is little literature about the impact upon students entering the military, coping with orientation, or the discipline and ethos that is associated with service life. This small scale projects intends to address this shortcoming by evaluating the impact transition has upon new recruits and asks:

1. What is the impact of transition and transfer upon students entering a military college?

2. What type of transition and transfer scheme does the college currently employ?

Transition is seen as the movement of students from one group to another within a school or between phases (Fabian, 2002; Galton et al., 1999). This addresses in part who is affected by the process but Fabian and Dunlop (2007) remind us that the whole family is involved. The impact can be profound upon the dynamics of the family although the idea of it being somehow associated only with school movements is not necessarily the case. A more apt definition is offered by Bronfenbrenner (1979, p.26) who states that an '… ecological transition occurs whenever a person's position in the ecological environment is altered as the result of a change in role, setting, or both'. He argues that it occurs naturally throughout human development and as such is both the causal factor for development and as a result of development.

There are clear elements that have been identified as affecting the transition process including; emotional well being, social well being and the supply of information to all parties (Fabian 2002); inclusion of the family unit (Bronfenbrenner, 1979); changing teaching methods (Knowles, 1990; Knox, 2005); formation of healthy relationship (James & Prout 1997; Bronfenbrenner, 1979); and belonging to a community (Schuller, Bassett-Grundy, Green, Hammond & Preston, 2002). Each element will be now briefly discussed.

The emotional well being of children and adults can affect their self esteem. Lawrence (2000, p.4) defines self esteem as 'a person's evaluation of the discrepancy between their self image and their ideal self'. The greater the gap between perception and ideal, the more impact it has upon the individual. Dowling (1995) found a positive correlation between levels of self esteem and academic performance whilst Newman and Blackburn (2002) recognise that children with higher

levels of resilience appear to cope better and recover faster from change and uncertainty. This highlights a need for developmental activities to lessen the impact of transitions on individuals and improve resilience and self esteem. However, Yates (2006) argues that it does not exist within the individual nor the situation, but in the transactions between them. Whichever view is taken it is apparent that the transition acts as a developmental opportunity whether intentional or not.

The movement between phases in life including education and employment are often seen as rites of passage. Van Gennep (1960, p. 3) suggests that the transitions of the individual between groups and environments are 'looked on as implicit in the very nature of existence, so that a man's life comes to be made up of a succession of stages with similar ends and beginnings'. The interesting element here is his suggestion that the rites of passage are embedded in the very fibres of existence, taking place naturally without effort on the part of the individual. Similarly, Jackson (2003) found that the transition into higher education can be perceived as a 'life's passage' but put forward the argument that it is brought about by a change in identity. Some of these passages are marked by occasions and celebrations allowing closure on the passing element and welcoming the new. Whichever way they are marked, they form part of the transition process and provide an indicator for the distance travelled along life's journey.

As the initiative for greater participation in learning takes place, market forces exist in learning establishments and provide the impetus for promoting institutions to the learner and their family. Byrne and Flood (2005) suggest that educators require a better appreciation of student experiences and issues they bring with them. This places unprecedented demands on colleges in terms of the transition process (Hultberg, Plos, Hendry & Kjellgren, 2008). Expectations and preparation can be dealt with through visits to the school or college, familiarisation with the environment and supplying more information. Whilst a visit may give insight into the school or college, it may not be wholly representative, but offers some reference points that may make the transition easier for the individual. This approach could also lessen the impact upon the family, providing they are included in the initiative.

These expectations also transfer the shift in responsibility for the learning process (Hultberg et al., 2008; Laing, Robinson & Johnston, 2005). There is a drive for learner autonomy and that they assume the role of primary motivator for their own self-directed learning. Knox (2005) highlights how students are exposed to a multitude of lecturers delivering material in a variety of ways. Students can only base their expectations upon their experiences of school and this highlights issues surrounding pedagogy and andragogy, and their associated methods. Knowles (1990, p. 55) defines pedagogy as 'the art and science of teaching children'. It is teacher orientated where the teacher assumes responsibility for what is taught, when it is taught, and how it is taught. Andragogy consists of learning strategies which are focused on adults. It is the process of engaging adult learners in the structure of the learning experience itself. Knowles (1990) suggests that whilst similar in its endeavours, andragogy differs from pedagogy because it aims to *help* adults learn not to teach them. Knowles makes several assumptions upon which the teaching of adults is based: they need to know why they are learning; be aware of their responsibility for learning; have a readiness to learn; have an orientation to learn and find practical uses for it.

There is no clear line at which the student becomes receptive to the different learning approaches. Brookfield (1986) warns against assigning a prescribed approach as all classes bring with them varying experiences and different levels of readiness to learn. Bruner (1996) offers a concept of

'folk pedagogy' that bridges the divide and merges them. He offers emphasis on four assumptions including seeing children as; initiating learning; learning from didactic exposure; thinkers; and being knowledgeable. These apply equally to adults and it appears that there is an intrinsic desire for all learners, regardless of age, to be treated the same.

Further to this is the notion that being an active participant in the learning process enables you to have views and opinions about it. Indeed, the United Nations (1989) *Article 12*, asserts that children who can form views have the right to express them and that they will be given due importance dependent upon age and maturity. This belief of 'agency' puts the child on equal standing in the learning process and has led to what James and Prout (1997) describe as a new, emergent and often implicit research and social paradigm that is aimed at transforming the manner in which children are seen. Children are now much more involved in their transition and expect their point of view to be considered (White & Sharp, 2007).

Social well being and formation of friendships can be seen as a motive for engaging voluntarily in a transition and also as an outcome of the transition. Indeed, Byrne and Flood (2005) found in a study of 129 students on their motives and expectation of higher education that 79% (n=102) listed the chance to meet new people and make new friends as important. Similarly at a younger level, Fabian (2002) suggests that it is social interaction and friendships that make school worthwhile. It is apparent that whilst friendships are an exciting element of starting afresh, the transition can be made easier if it is undertaken with existing friendships. Anxiety can develop and elevate itself to such high levels surrounding being parted from friends that academic progress can slow down (Galton et al., 1999). Moving on with social circles intact allows the focus to be placed in other areas and reduce the cumulative effect of the transition.

James and Prout (1997) identify age classes that refer to a group of individuals who progress through the age structure together, such as the age class that operates in school. The grouping and transition occurs at ready defined points, such as movement to junior and secondary school, regardless of ability or individual characteristics and is used to differentiate workload and level, responsibilities, status, duties, and privileges. Sharing common activities allows development and social structures to be formed (Bronfenbrenner 1979). This could be seen as important immediately after the move or carried out prior to it in a pre-emptive manner such as visit to schools, meeting the teacher, or visits by older children. While it is likely that social well being and the formation of friendships supports a smooth transition, we must be mindful of the opportunity transitions provide for some individuals to start afresh and leave unwanted friendships behind.

The last element is the importance placed upon belonging to a community and its influence upon transition. Schuller et al. (2002) appreciate the importance of school ethos and the relevance on self-image. They also found that inclusion and a sense of belonging motivate students to learn. However, it is not always apparent to the individual what is expected of them in their new surroundings. Fabian (2002) argues that the school is a powerful force in shaping behaviour but some rules are implicit and are difficult for children to master which could lead to the exclusion of some if they are reprimanded for reasons for which they are unaware.

Methodology

The institution which is the focus of this paper teaches vocational courses in aeronautical engineering to national and international students. The students are enrolled upon the Advanced

Modern Apprenticeship, ultimately working towards a NVQ level 3 in aeronautical engineering. The course lasts six months and starts weekly with sixteen students on each intake. The chosen class comprised 16 males with ages ranging between 17 and 28 years (*M*=20 years, *sd*3.44), who were training to become Aircraft Maintenance Mechanics within the Royal Air Force. They were interviewed 10 weeks into their course, having previously completed an 8 week basic recruit training course at the feeder establishment.

Ethical issues were considered and structure applied to the research to add validity to the findings and recommendations. The first stage of the process was a document search which took place to review the college policies on inclusion. Data were then gathered using questionnaires and interviews to triangulate findings (Bartlett & Burton, 2007). The advantages of using a questionnaire included efficient use of time, anonymity for the respondents, and questions being standardised (Munn & Drever, 1990). Standardised questions removed any bias that could have been introduced, but Oppenheim (1992) warns that this distance also removes the ability to explain or re-word questions to aid understanding. This was addressed during the interview element, allowing for expansion of answers.

A mixture of 'open' and 'closed' questions was used to gather quantitative and qualitative types of data, including multiple-choice questions and those that incorporated a scale. These allowed for straightforward analysis of the responses to devise graphical representations whilst the open questions allowed for more indepth responses. Data were reviewed for similarities, differences and common themes. A small-scale pilot was undertaken with four respondents and the questionnaire was amended as a result of the feedback.

A semi-structured approach was chosen for the interviews because this gave the opportunity to probe answers whilst offering some degree of validity. This resulted in an interview schedule being drafted which included introductory comments, topics and key questions, prompts and examples, and closing comments. Field notes were chosen as the preferred method for recording the interview as they provided some feeling for the context of answers, including non verbal communication.

Four of the 16 students who completed questionnairesvolunteered to take part in a follow-up interview but one withdrew his consent at the last minute, and so the final number fell to three who were interviewed as a group.

Analysis of results

Transition was generally perceived by the group as involving movement from one phase to another and during the school years was primarily parent initiated. Indeed, one recollection was of '*Mum and Dad sat in the head's office talking about the school*'. By contrast, one student was given free reign by his father to select his schools and colleges. Whatever the reason or whoever initiated it, all students (n=16) had undergone a number of transitions in their education with the average being 3.1 transitions. Undergoing multiple transitions does not have a cumulative affect by making further transitions easier than the first time (Dowling 1995) as there are many other influences. However, Bronfenbrenner (1979) reminds us that such movements offer developmental opportunities and the collective increase in resilience is a beneficial outcome dependent upon the ease of the transition. Indeed, the interview confirmed this notion, with responses including '*moving helps to prepare for future transitions*' and '*repeating moving doesn't make it any easier, but I seem more able to cope*'.

The notion of effective communication highlighted some interesting responses. Information about the college was received by 94% (n=15) of respondents prior to arrival including a phone number contact sheet and a brief by two members of staff. However, there are some issues about which the students reported inaccurate information regarding social and service provision. The issue of better information prior to arrival was raised by 63% (n=10) in response to how the transition process could be improved. It is important that precise facts are disseminated, ensuring student expectations are met and students are not reprimanded for rules for which they are not aware (Fabian 2002). This inadequate information transfer may have resulted in only 50% (n=8) of respondents agreeing that their expectations of the college were met. Indeed, 25% (n=4) found not knowing what to expect hard to cope with upon arrival at the college. Therefore, providing accurate and relevant information and meeting the expectations of the students are highlighted as a priority.

Of those that received information about the college, 73% (n=11) shared this with parents. This relatively high level of parental involvement is not mirrored within college policy as only senior members of staff are permitted to make contact with parents. The exception is when parents initiate calls to the college and then details may be passed only if student permission has been granted. Transition activities are best when they include the family in the process (Fabian 2002) but the college undertakes little co-construction of the transition with parents. This is limited to inviting families of students to attend 'open days' where tours are given of the various learning environments and contact can also be made with the staff.

The remaining element of communication is between the feeder college, which currently provides little information other than a précis of the student's performance. However, there have been occurrences when it has not reflected reality or it has not been disseminated to appropriate teaching areas. This often includes information about learning needs, which leaves staff unable to act and support the student. This is important as the arrival briefings are delivered using powerpoint as a medium and there is a great deal of information given which might not be accessed if students are unable to read quickly. One interviewee commented that '*I was given too much information and too much powerpoint*'. Currently the support process is cumbersome involving many different tiers of management. Once raised, any issue may have to wait until appropriate meetings are held on a routine calendar basis and therefore may take several weeks to react to student needs.

Byrne and Flood (2005) found that 79% of students questioned in their study rated the chance to meet new people and make new friends as important. In the current study, the formation of friendships were already in place with 94% (n=15) making the transition from the feeder college with friends. The creation of solid friendships with strong connections can aid learning and development (Bronfenbrenner 1979). They also act as continuity between different environments helping to bridge the gap between the old and the new. Similarly responses to an open question asking what made the transition easier highlighted that starting with friends and being placed in rooms with people they knew helped ease the transition. However, during the interview, it became apparent that students' had made the move with acquaintances, knowing *of* others in the class, but not necessarily having friendships in place. This contrast in findings may have been caused by the selection of a smaller sample group for the interview stage.

Laing et al. (2005) highlighted a shortcoming of traditional 'fresher weeks' as not providing adequate time to develop social groups. Only 50% of students (n=8) approved of Resource and Initiative (R & I) training taking place so early in the course. This initiative is designed to provide

students with the opportunities to complete team building exercises as well as take part in organised sporting and outward bound activities. Bronfenbrenner (1979) identified participating in a joint activity as developing a primary dyad; something he sees as having a powerful effect upon motivating learning. The concept of teamwork and bonding is a fundamental constituent of the armed forces, nurturing the notion of 'esprit de corps'. Upon arrival at the college students were placed in accommodation alphabetically and then on R & I training they were put in teams according to surname. They felt that '*this allowed them to get to know their room mates very well, very quickly*'. This could be seen as a successful element of the course and the manner in which it helps cement friendships, helping lessen the effect of the transition.

Responses in the group interview suggested that current recruits could act as mentors to students entering the same type of course who started twelve weeks after them. Fabian (2002) suggests that pairing can build the confidence of both parties and aids the induction process. This could have the effect of empowering the students to take responsibility for the college induction, attempting to improve the systems, instead of being passive recipients of the process. This idea had a noticeable effect upon the interview and the students became visibly excited at the thought of their possible involvement.

Interviews responses highlighted the concern for future transitions, especially the impending movement to a front line station with probable deployments to forward operating bases such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan. The main areas focussed on; the formation of new friendships; fitting in with established groups; the movement from training to operational status and the implications for them; and the expectations of serving abroad. There appeared to have been some informal contact made from experienced students returning to the college to undertake further training and the group felt this was beneficial. This could be formalised, also allowing developmental opportunities for senior students.

The document analysis revealed that students move as a group from Basic Recruit Training and are assigned a single point of contact (Training Development Coordinator), including out of hours provision, for personal and any training concerns. However, no contact is made by the Training Development Coordinator prior to the students' transition. Continuity of curriculum is maintained with 'service ethos' elements running throughout both institutions which develops a sense of belonging and is aimed at supporting the transition to military life. Information transfer from the supplying establishment consists of a synopsis of student performance and any additional learning needs. The college does not have a dedicated 'transition co-ordinator', but has devolved responsibility to a lower level associated with coordinating student movement.

Recommendations

The findings have highlighted possible courses of action which, if embraced, could support the development of an effective transition policy, benefiting the college and students. It is these recommendations that form the basis for this section of the paper.

There is evidence to suggest the need to introduce a Transition Coordinator responsible for reviewing and writing a college policy, providing continuity of a single point of contact, benchmarking and training staff in best practice. This role would also assume control of the pre-arrival brief, controlling the allocation of staff, and ensuring common and up-to-date information is given. There is evidence to support the need to expedite the process by which additional learning support information is passed to appropriate teaching areas.

The current family 'open day' format could be extended to act as a transition activity prior to enlisting in the military, allowing the family to view the college through taster sessions. This may also aid recruitment, help to market the college better on a local and national level, and give a realistic insight into what to expect. It is best to remain mindful of the warning offered by Galton et al. (1999) that the educational benefits must not be overwhelmed by the 'public relations' elements.

During initial training prior to arrival, the formation of relationships that will aid the transition process can be addressed by better allocation of students. Currently they are not necessarily placed with the same peer group that they will be with in the stage of training. It is proposed that creating cohorts of students who will move on to feeder colleges might lead to a smoother transition, making progression easier. Conflicting answers were given when comparisons made between responses from the interview and questionnaires suggesting that for some students the transition was made within a cohort of friends and for others it was not. Further research and investigation is required to establish the policy at the feeder establishment and impact upon the students.

There is a clear need to introduce a peer support scheme to facilitate a smoother transition into and out of the college by establishing a formal mentoring process by those already on the programme. This reflects the concept of agency as students could be empowered to develop the transition process. The second element of the mentoring scheme could be led by students returning from front line service to undertake further training. They could be given the chance to talk to junior students, helping to prepare them for their next transition to operational status and assignment to a flying squadron. The scheme might also have beneficial opportunities to those assuming the role of mentor, allowing them to develop interpersonal and communication skills, whilst feeling valued by the college. The Transition Co-ordinator could also be responsible for this area, focussing on both the transition into and out of the college.

An analysis of the data highlights the level of awareness and acceptance by staff of the impact that transition has upon student performance and retention. All new instructors are required to undertake training, provided by the college, aimed at meeting the minimum standard required for lecturers. The introduction of transition issues onto this course might raise its profile and allow for a more holistic approach to ease the process.

Future numbers of students being trained within the college are due to reach new highs; therefore the impact of transition on performance may become a strategic, managerial concern, and not just an issue dealt with by lecturers. Implementation of the recommendations may go some way in addressing the areas for development before they escalate to an unmanageable level.

References

Bartlett, S. & Burton, D. (2007). *Introduction to educational studies.* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Brookfield, S. (1986). *Understanding and facilitating adult learning.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc Publishers.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development. Experiments by nature and design.* Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education.* London: Harvard University Press.

Byrne, M. & Flood, B. (2005). A study of accounting students' motives, expectations and preparedness for higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 29*(2), 111-124.

Denscombe, M. (2003). *The good research guide for small social research projects.* (2nd ed.). Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Dowling, M. (1995). *Starting school at four: A joint adventure.* London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Fabian, H. (2002). *Children starting school.* London: David Fulton Publishers.

Fabian, H. & Dunlop, A-W. (2007). *Outcomes of good practice in transition processes for children entering primary school.* Netherlands: Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Galton, M., Gray, J. & Ruddock, J. (1999). *The Impact of School Transitions and Transfers on Pupil Progress and Attainment.* Available at: http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/ data/uploadfiles/RR131.doc (Accessed 30 April, 2008).

Hultberg J., Plos, K., Hendry, G. D. & Kjellgren, K. I. (2008). Scaffolding students' transition into higher education: parallel introductory courses for students and teachers. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 32*(1), 47-57.

Jackson, C. (2003). 'Transitions into higher education: Gendered implications for academic self-concept'. *Oxford Review of Education, 29*(3), 331-346.

James, A. & Prout, A. (1997). *Constructing and reconstructing childhood.* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge Falmer.

Knox, H. (2005). 'Making the transition from further to higher education: the impact of a preparatory module on retention, progression and performance', *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 29*(3), 103-110.

Knowles, M. (1990). *The adult learners: A neglected species.* 4th Edition. Houston: Gulf Publishing Ltd.

Laing, C., Robinson, A. & Johnston, V. (2005). Managing transition into higher education: An on-line spiral induction programme. *Active Learning in Higher Education, 6*(3), 243-255.

Lawrence, D. (2000). *Building self esteem with adult learners.* London: Paul Chapman.

Munn, P. & Drever. E. (1990). *Using questionnaires in small-scale research: A teacher's guide.* Edinburgh: Macdonald Lindsay Pindar plc.

Newman, T. & Blackburn, S. (2002). *Transitions in the lives of children and young people: Resilience factors.* Edinburgh: Scottish Executive Education Department. Available at: http://www.barnardos.org.uk/what_works_in_building_resilience__-_summary_1_.pdf. (Accessed 6 October, 2008).

Oppenheim, A. (1992). *Questionnaire design, interviewing and attitude measurement.* (2nd ed.). Great Britain: Biddles Ltd.

Robson, C. (1993). *Real world research: A resource for social scientists and practitioner researchers.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Schuller, T., Bassett-Grundy, A., Green, A., Hammond, C. & Preston, J. (2002). *Learning, continuity and change in adult life.* London: The Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning.

United Nations (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child.* Available at: http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm (Accessed 1 October, 2008).

Van Gennep, A. (1960). *Rites of passage* (Translation by Vizedom, M. & Caffee, G. L.). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

White, G. & Sharp, C. (2007). 'It is different…because you are getting older and growing up'. How children make sense of the transition to Year 1. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 15*(1), 87-102

Yates, T. M. (2006). *Resilience at an early age and its impact on child development: Comments on Luthar and Sameroff. Available at:* http://adlab.ucr.edu/publications/ Resilience%20Comments%20on%20Luthar%20&%20Sameroff.pdf (Accessed 3 October, 2008).

Correspondence about this paper should be addressed to:

Andrew Moreman
Glyndŵr University
amoreman@tiscali.co.uk

Dr Hilary Fabian
Glyndŵr University
h.fabian@btinternet.com