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Identifying support needs and developing support for a diverse student group in their transition to higher education

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Background: Success in students' transition into higher education is influenced by multiple factors including schooling, prior knowledge, self-confidence. If the transition is unsuccessful, students will leave their course. The current non-continuation rate for first year students in the UK is 5.3% with students from most deprived areas more likely to discontinue.

Aim: This study explored the impact of student support programme aimed at widening participation students on transition into university.

Methods: Mixed methods study with questionnaire (n=106 first year pharmacy students, 74% response rate) and six semi-structured interviews.

Findings: Academic factors, such as managing course content and adapting to the new teaching style had an impact on the transition as did environmental factors like living accommodation and secondary school background. Attended the support sessions had no impact on preparedness but made it made academics feel more approachable.

Conclusion: HE providers can provide more holistic support to ensure successful transition.

Full paper

Background: The first year of university has been identified as a critical for a student's future success, retention and persistence (1-2). At some institutions up to 40% of students terminate their studies in the first academic year as the different environment comes as a shock to them (3). The current non-continuation rate for first year students in the UK is 5.3% with students from most deprived areas more likely to discontinue [HESA]. The four main areas affecting the transition into university: environmental, financial, social and academic factors (4). Models such as five senses of student success (5) and Nicholson's Transition Cycle (6) have been used to explain the changes.

As a professional course, the programme has proportionately higher number of widening participation and BAME students. Series of support sessions were developed to help the transition for all stage 1 students to give additional support. This study explored the transition and initial adjustment into university for students on a pharmacy course and the impact of the support sessions.

Methods: The study utilised mixed methods with questionnaire (n=106, 74% of cohort) and semi structured interviews (n=6) with first year students starting university in 2021. Data was collected six weeks into the academic year. The questionnaire was designed based on existing models of transition.

Qualitative results: Three main themes were identified from the interviews: becoming an independent learner, self-care, and support network. As part of becoming an independent learner there was a recognised shift in responsibility; even though support was available, the participants felt the weight of ownership of their studies. Linked to this was a change in learning styles and less opportunities to self-assess in comparison to school.

"In secondary school you are spoon fed where you have all of the information and they give you all the examples [...] in university this differs a lot."

Self-care was related to independent living and being responsible for themselves, including house holds chores. However, what was more challenging to the participants was maintaining good sleep hygiene.

“...it was going out sort of late in the evening and staying up late in the morning and then just yeah shifting the sleep from at night to in the day.”

Support network featured extracurricular activities and societies as a gateway to the wider university community. Participants also spoke about the importance of support from family and their personal tutor as well as the importance of making new friends. Students living at home felt they were at disadvantage when it came to this.

“I was worried about is because I live at home, so I thought, like because I live at home, it will be harder to like make friends...”

Quantitative results:

Total of 106 (74%) students completed the questionnaire. Of these 67% (n=71) were female and 33% (n=35) were male. Further demographic details are in table 1.

Table 1 Ethnicity and age of the participants

Ethnicity	Asian/British Asian	Arab	Black	Mixed	White
n	28	8	13	4	53
%	26.4	7.5	12.3	3.8	50.0
Age (SD 2.3)	18	19	20	21-25	>25
n	39	39	15	7	4
%	36.8	36.8	14.2	7.5	3.7

Students who identified as white were more likely to attend the support sessions but the difference was not statistically significant.

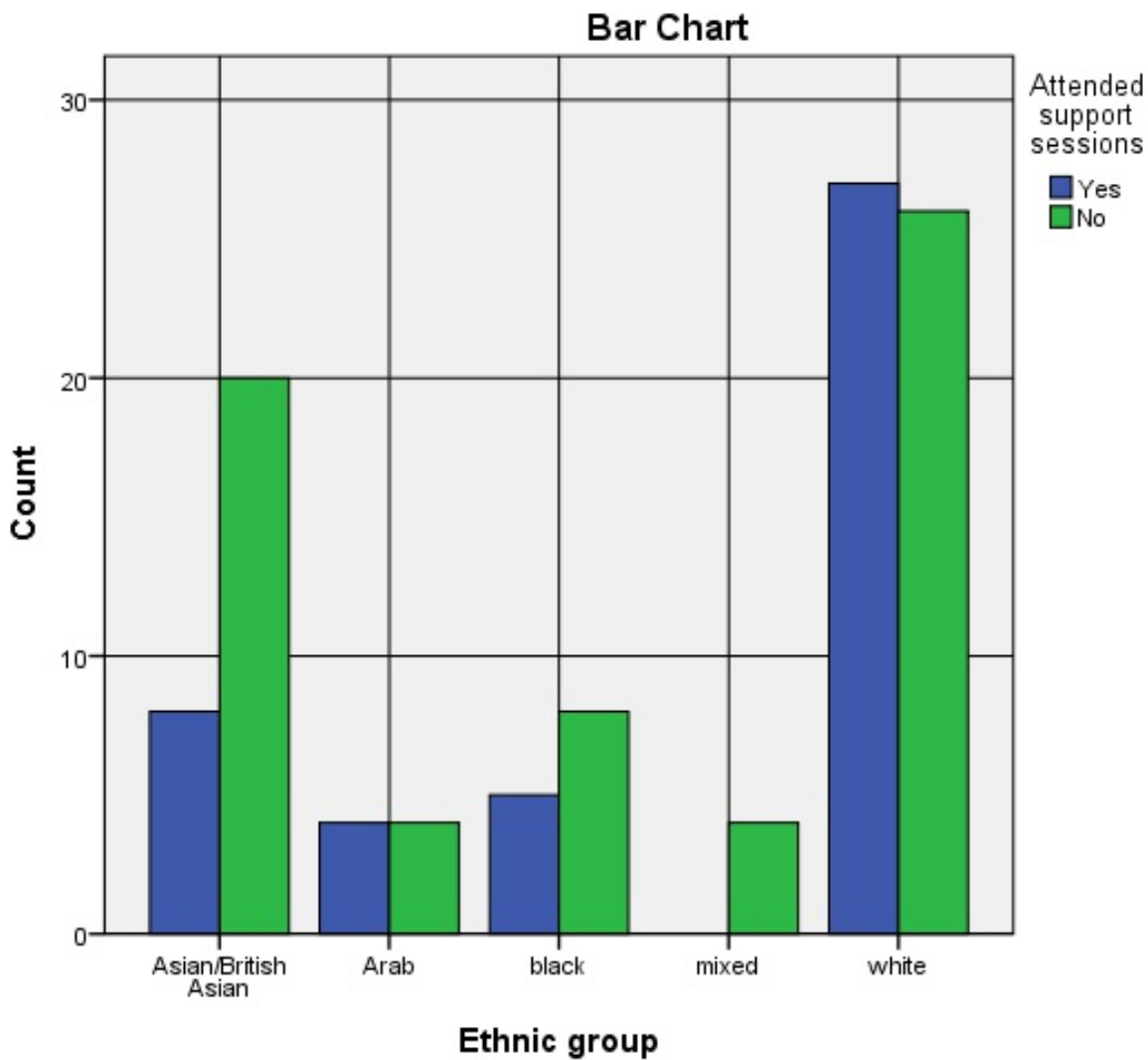


Figure 1 Bar chart Attendance in support sessions by ethnicity

There was a correlation between the schooling background of students and their academic struggles. Those who had attended grammar and private schools had fewer academic struggles overall, whereas those students who had attended state schools found the content difficult and encountered more academic challenges. Gender also seemed to impact students' preparedness as female students were found to be more prepared than the male students in terms of preparation for university. Additional findings also include the impact of living arrangements, as those students living at home would encounter less emotional challenges than those who had moved into accommodation.

Conclusion: Students encounter different challenges and experiences in their transition to university, dependent on contextual factors such

as accommodation, financial situation and coursework (7). Findings from this suggest that schooling had an impact on the academic struggles and emotional struggles that students faced when transitioning to university. Another finding is that offering support sessions made the academics appear more approachable. All students struggle with transition and depending on their background, whether it is ethnicity or schooling may not be willing to seek help; key is offering support that meets the need of the students. With diverse group of students, multiple approaches are needed to provide support.

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