

# Looking back to move forward: Tracing students' experiences of transitioning to university

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## Abstract

*A growing body of research conceptualises students' transitions into higher education as non-linear and multi-faceted, extending beyond the first months of university. Nevertheless, focusing on first-year students' experiences can provide important insights. We adopt Schlossberg's (1981) theory of transitions in our study involving first-year arts and humanities undergraduate students at a Scottish university, who traced their experiences of adjusting to university life in the academic year 2020-21. We were interested in understanding this move from one educational stage to another amidst the potential added barrier of the COVID-19 pandemic. Collecting data during the pandemic captured students' reflections on their educational experience in the rapid shift to online learning, and the impact of the lack of face-to-face contact with staff and peers. While perhaps expected that COVID-19 drastically impacted the specifics of the transitional experience, we were surprised to find in our data (written diary entries and interviews (n=5), supplemented with interviews with students not involved in reflective writing (n=8)) that there were more universals of the process than there were factors relating to the time of crisis, particularly with relation to the self. Furthermore, an argument is made for the wider impact of dialogic practice to ease the transitional process.*

*Keywords: belonging; online teaching and learning; reflective writing; student experience; transitions*

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## Introduction

The incoming first-year undergraduate cohort in September 2020 underwent the unique experience of transitioning into university education during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The combined challenge of beginning studies and dealing with pandemic-related restrictions raised questions about their transition to university specifically, and this process of transitioning into university more

generally. As lecturing staff with an acute interest in aspects of student experience, we sought to ask how important the physical, face-to-face contact in university settings is during this time of transition, and what happens when it is hampered, i.e., when instruction moves online. As we will demonstrate, our analysis indicates some pandemic-specific impacts relating to certain academic aspects, and especially social aspects, as well as more widely applicable lessons we can learn about students' transitional experiences, which remain pertinent amidst ongoing adjustments to higher education in a post-pandemic world.

In what follows, we discuss existing scholarship on transitions to higher education, conceptualising them as non-linear and constantly negotiated. To capture the nature of the pandemic's impact on the transition to university, we then trace five first-year undergraduate students' experiences around key moments throughout the academic year, expressed in multiple pieces of reflective writing and one interview. In doing so, we highlight the value of dialogic practice. We also present interview data from eight additional first-year undergraduate students to offer broader perspectives. Our data indicate certain universals related to academic and social aspects of education that exist within experiences of transitions to university. The lessons learned transcend the specific time of crisis during which the data was collected, and ultimately we argue for a focus on these consistently core issues.

## **Literature Review**

### *Conceptualising transitions*

Transitions within higher education have been conceptualised as a process of becoming, moving beyond merely understanding them as relating to initial induction into the university setting, or as a process of development (Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 735). Gale and Parker argue that understanding transitions as becoming means '[rejecting] the view that transitions are always times in which people experience crisis and that these are bracketed by relatively stable life experiences' (Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 744). Rather, it relates to transitions facilitating the formation and experiences of a new multifaceted set of identities (Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 745), or as Anderson et al. (2012, p. 70) state: transitions encapsulate an experience of "role change," which in our research relates to young people assuming the role of "university student." However, we also acknowledge that our project exploring students' experiences and understandings of transitions was itself set against a "crisis" backdrop, namely the COVID-19 pandemic: this is not to say, though, that we understand the transition itself as a "crisis." Our eschewing of the notion of "crisis" aligns with seminal literature in the wider field of transitions, beyond higher education. Specifically, we draw on Schlossberg's (1981, p. 6) explanation that while an understanding of transitions has its roots in crisis theory,

in fact it is more helpful to think about transitions as relating to amended practices in the face of some new reality, which may offer opportunities alongside challenges. Particularly informative for our work is the 4S framework which helps us understand ‘how one copes with change’ (Anderson et al., 2012, p.61), according to:

- Situation: Understanding the wider context in which the transition is happening
- Support: The resources are that an individual can lean on
- Self: Understanding as much as possible who this individual is and what makes them unique
- Strategies: The techniques or practices the individual deploys to be able to cope

Our work sought to explore an overlap in how students dealt with two simultaneously occurring transitions, namely one from secondary into tertiary education, and the other from a recognised “normality” to the predominantly online existence of COVID lockdowns.

Scholars like Gale and Parker also emphasise that transitions are not only relevant at the early stage of first-year students entering into higher education, nor should they be understood as linear—transitions can encapsulate myriad shifts and adjustments that students at any stage prior to, during, or post their university experience can undertake (Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 748; Trautwein & Bosse, 2017, p. 384). This is particularly relevant in the context of adjusting to the new ways of living during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although we have focused on the adjustment to first year, we again uphold this view of transitions as continuous (espoused also by Briggs et al., 2012, p. 19; Ding & Yu, 2022, p. 221; Schlossberg, 1981, p. 7). Indeed, much like Gregersen et al. (2021), who take a “becoming” approach to understanding transitions, we agree that there nonetheless remains important insight to be gained by focusing on the move into and through first-year undergraduate study especially. Tett et al. (2017), working in a Scottish context, also conceptualise transitions as longitudinal, a process over time by which students gradually become integrated into the university space. Their work links this “becoming” process of adjusting to the university setting to their academic and social relationships with those around them. Indeed, the social aspect of transitioning to university has emerged strongly from previous scholarship, and it is to this that we now turn.

#### *Transitions: social*

Supporting Tett et al.’s (2017) findings, the apparent consensus from previous literature is that university’s social aspect is vital in the transition process. For

example, Thompson et al.'s (2021, pp. 1403–1404) first- and second-year UK university participants highlighted the value in discussing experiences and concerns with peers and close friends to gain a feeling of empathy and a powerful sense of shared experience. It is worth drawing attention to one participant's emphasis on 'getting to know people really early on.' This is pertinent to our work, given our interest in understanding how social connections were formed and nurtured when much of the university experience was online.

Findings from Trautwein and Bosse's (2017) study in the German context align with those of Thompson et al. (2021) regarding the importance for incoming undergraduate students to make social connections with peers. Interestingly, their participants discussed the challenges in developing these relationships, such as feeling overwhelmed and paradoxically lonely among many other students on a large campus and in large classes. Participants also mentioned that, even when forming friendships early in the process was possible, discussing struggles related to the transitional process was itself difficult, as not everyone is comfortable sharing their worries with others they do not know well, or have only known briefly (Trautwein & Bosse, 2017, p. 382). Again, we were interested in if and how such experiences would manifest in the primarily online context of transitioning to university during COVID-19, where communication with peers can be even more difficult. Research across different national contexts indicates the social impact of students' transitional journeys during COVID-19. For instance, Sigurdardottir et al. (2023) compared undergraduate students entering Icelandic higher education in 2017 with those doing so in 2020, quantitatively exploring these cohorts' "social tie formation." Perhaps unsurprisingly, the 2020 cohort established a smaller number of social relationships than did the 2017 cohort. This coheres with Austin et al.'s (2024, p. 18) findings that Canadian first-year university students were frustrated by limited chances to meet and socialise with their peers during the pandemic.

#### *Transitions: academic*

The literature indicates some pedagogical considerations that a university and its staff might implement to facilitate the academic transition for incoming students. For example, the findings from Jansen and van der Meer (2012, pp. 11-12) and Denny (2021, pp. 131-132) highlight the value in providing discipline-tailored, rather than generic, academic skills support. This is a key recommendation, given that academic norms and expectations are very distinct not only when comparing secondary education (or indeed vocational education, as noted by Tett et al., 2017) with higher education, but also when comparing content areas across the university curriculum. In many university systems (including our Scottish context), first-year undergraduate students select a range of courses across diverse disciplines, therefore encountering a series of difficult adjustments to the different disciplinary

expectations when moving from one class to another (e.g., from linguistics to Scottish history). This supports the notion that transitions in higher education are not necessarily linear— they happen not just across time, but also across space(s).

Delving deeper into some uncertainties students face in their academic adjustment to higher education, Tett et al. (2017, pp. 394-395) found that students coming from vocational education had several concerns during the early phase of transition. These included building rapport with staff (termed by the authors as ‘being known, and knowing, your community’) and staff accessibility, trying to comprehend exactly what quality and level of written work was expected, making strategic learning choices (e.g., which reading to complete and which to bypass), and learning how to manage feedback. One solution that participants reported was navigating the norms around engaging with staff and drawing on them for support when needed (Tett et al., 2017, pp. 397-398). As an initial reaction to COVID-19, research exploring aspects of academic transitions sought to understand the rapid, forced transition from in-person teaching and learning, to online education in early 2020. Despite such research operationalising “transitions” differently, it nonetheless offers insight into our own work. For example, Buckley et al. (2021, p. 401) analysed staff and student survey responses in Irish higher education, finding that participants in online lectures reported feeling a ‘sense of isolation,’ and a ‘disconnect’ between staff and students, reflecting a lack of rapport-building. Furthermore, some of Turnbull et al.’s (2021, pp. 6415-6416) “best practice” recommendations for distance teaching and learning potentially apply to our work on understanding student transitions. These include always taking a blended-learning approach to course design and delivery to buffer any impact from future emergency situations, and ensuring students are fully supported in participating in any online delivery moving forward to help retain closer rapport among those in the teaching and learning setting. Turnbull et al.’s (2021) recommendations are relevant even in this post-pandemic phase, given that in university education (as elsewhere), we have not completely eschewed online elements in teaching and learning but rather recognise them as retaining relevance given the opportunities still offered for accessibility, creativity, and convenience. This current reality therefore underlines the need to capture students’ reflections on this kind of educational experience, and how this sat within the overall picture of their accounts of transitioning to higher education.

### *Research questions*

Given our interest in understanding the complex nature of transitioning to tertiary education amidst the unprecedented challenges of COVID-19, and our methodological interest in how best to capture such experiences, we asked:

1. What factors did students identify as shaping their experiences of transitioning to university during COVID-19?
2. How can reflective writing practice help students understand their experiences of transitioning to university, based on students who engage with this practice versus those who do not?

## **Methodology**

### *Data collection*

Given our treatment of transitions as a process, we followed the trajectories of first-year undergraduate students enrolling in the academic year 2020-21. We employed a variation of the diary-interview method (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977), and recruited five students in arts and humanities, following an open call to participants on a large first-year course. They were invited to complete diary entries four times throughout the year, responding each time to the following prompt:

*Please describe a recent experience (positive, negative, or somewhere in between!) that felt important to you in your process of adjusting to university-level education:*

- *In describing your experience, it may be useful to think about the “who/what/why/when/where/how” of the situation.*
- *Why do you feel this experience was important?*
- *Can you describe how it made you feel?*
- *What have you learned from this experience, that you could perhaps put into practice in the near future?*

The five participants were asked to contribute four diary entries at key moments in the academic year, namely the start (entry 1) and end of semester (entries 2 and 4, one in each semester), and mid-term when coursework is due (entry 3). As can be seen, this prompt did not specifically elicit information about COVID-19, but we aimed instead to let students foreground whatever they felt was important to them.

These five participants were then interviewed towards the academic year's end, as a further opportunity to reflect on their experiences. Following an additional call for participants, we also interviewed a further eight first-year undergraduate participants who had not participated in the reflective-diary writing. Firstly, this captured a broader spectrum of student perspectives and secondly, it enabled comparison between students who had had the opportunity to engage with reflective writing, and those who had not. Given that not all interviewees completed the diary entries, we feel it is more appropriate to consider interviews as part of a wider dialogic practice, rather than just a diary-interview method. Our project was

reviewed and approved by the College of Arts Ethics Committee (application number 100200004), and all students provided informed consent prior to participation.

### *Reflective, dialogic methods*

Embedded in our methodological design was a belief in the potential of using dialogic and reflective approaches to not only elicit rich data in response to our research questions, but also to help participating students develop a more in-depth understanding of their experiences throughout their first year. The four diary entries would, we hoped, help students process events they perceived as important, perhaps seeing them in a new light and recognizing constructive ways forward (Dikilitaş & Bostancıoğlu, 2019, p. 126). Furthermore, we recognised our longitudinal approach as valuable for capturing fluctuations, inspired by Tett et al.'s (2017) argument that 'transition is not a one-off event [...] but is an on-going process that is repeated over time' (p. 389).

All thirteen interviews took place towards the end of that academic year and were conducted online, a communication mode consistent with the teaching delivery at that time, and therefore familiar to our participants. Our approach was inspired by dialogic interview techniques (e.g., Way et al., 2015), for example our interest in promoting students' 'self-reflexivity' (Way et al., 2015, p. 720), and offering space for students' views and stances to evolve throughout the discussion.

Our goal was for all students to feel that they had not only contributed to the study but also benefitted from their participation.

### *Data analysis*

Each of the three established datasets (diary entries, interviews with the diary participants, interviews with non-diary participants) were coded with NVivo 14, using the 4S framework (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 62), i.e., *Situation*, *Support*, *Self*, and *Strategies*, an analytical approach characterised as abductive. Aligned with Anderson et al. (2012), we were interested in understanding how the 4S framework could be used to explore students 'taking stock of coping resources' (p. 38). We also drew inspiration from Olt and Tao (2020) in their application of this very model to explore international students' experiences as they adjusted to tertiary education in rural United States. Once our data had been organised into these four overarching categories, another coding phase took place to identify emergent sub-codes within each.

**Table 1**

*Sub-themes and total numbers of references across the three datasets*

Situation	Support	Self	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General impact of COVID (34)</li> <li>• Adjusting to tertiary-level study (20)</li> <li>• Drawbacks of online learning (14)</li> <li>• Advantages of online learning (10)</li> <li>• Adjusting to online learning (6)</li> <li>• Prior familiarity with university (5)</li> <li>• Balancing external and academic responsibilities (3)</li> <li>• Importance of in-person learning (2)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lacking peer support (32)</li> <li>• Lacking staff support (20)</li> <li>• Support from staff (16)</li> <li>• Peer support with academic work (14)</li> <li>• Social connections with peers (13)</li> <li>• Family support (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overcoming worries about academic capability (12)</li> <li>• Experiencing procrastination (7)</li> <li>• Experiencing resilience (5)</li> <li>• Experiencing worries about academic capability (5)</li> <li>• Learning for self-fulfillment (3)</li> <li>• Being an independent learner (3)</li> <li>• Confidence to participate in seminars (3)</li> <li>• Overcoming procrastination (2)</li> <li>• Confidence to take on responsibility (2)</li> <li>• Experiencing mental health challenges (2)</li> <li>• Overcoming worries about social interactions (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time management and planning (18)</li> <li>• Use of lecture recordings (11)</li> <li>• Developing independent learning strategies (6)</li> <li>• Lack of routine and poor time management (5)</li> <li>• Developing strategies for note-taking in lectures (4)</li> <li>• Taking breaks (2)</li> <li>• Avoiding distractions (1)</li> </ul>

In the presentation of findings that follows, note that the 4S categories are ordered according to their frequency within each of the three datasets (most to least frequent). Aligned with Olt and Tao (2020), we have used the 4S categories to provide the overarching structure to the presentation of findings, as we sought to focus on the extent to which there were shared experiences across the participants (rather than on individual progression).



In addition to using the 4Ss as the overarching coding framework, we also sought to identify instances in the data which elucidated the potential value of reflective writing as a tool for facilitating the transitional process into tertiary education (i.e., in response to Research Question 2).

## Results

### RESEARCH QUESTION 1

#### *Diary data*

As described above, we asked five students to record events that mattered to them. Table 2 summarises the categories (in bold) and sub-themes (in brackets) identified in each entry. As can be seen, the participants tended to focus on factors relating mostly to Self, Support, and Situation, with references to Strategies being less frequent.

**Table 2**

*Predominant theme(s) emergent from each diary entry for participants 1-5*

	Diary 1 (Oct 2020)	Diary 2 (Dec 2020)	Diary 3 (Jan 2021)	Diary 4 (Mar 2021)
1	<b>Self</b> (overcoming worries about academic capability)  <b>Support</b> (peer support with academic work)	<b>Situation</b> (adjusting to tertiary-level study)  <b>Self</b> (overcoming procrastination)  <b>Support</b> (peer support with academic work)	<b>Situation</b> (adjusting to online learning)  <b>Self</b> (confidence to participate in seminars)	<b>Self</b> (confidence to take on responsibility; overcoming worries about academic capability)  <b>Situation</b> (adjusting to tertiary-level study)
2	<b>Self</b> (experiencing worries about academic capability)	<b>Self</b> (experiencing worries about academic capability)	<b>Support</b> (lacking peer support)	<b>Self</b> (experiencing procrastination)
3	<b>Situation</b> (adjusting to tertiary-level study)  <b>Strategies</b> (developing strategies for note-taking in lectures)	<b>Self</b> (experiencing procrastination)	<b>Strategies</b> (time management and planning)	<i>No submission</i>
4	<b>Support</b> (lacking staff support)	<b>Situation</b> (adjusting to tertiary-level study)	<b>Situation</b> (adjusting to tertiary-level study)	<b>Self</b> (overcoming worries about academic capability)

	<b>Strategies</b> (time management and planning)			
5	<b>Situation</b> (adjusting to tertiary-level study; adjusting to online learning)	<b>Support</b> (peer support with academic work)	<b>Support</b> (social connections with peers)	<b>Strategies</b> (time management and planning; taking breaks)

Self: Most issues raised related to academic performance irrespective of COVID, for example “experiencing / overcoming worries about academic capability,” and “experiencing / overcoming procrastination.” The following excerpts exemplify relevant issues relating to experiencing and overcoming worries about academic capability in turn:

The other group’s presentation was much better than ours. This experience wasn’t unique—I often feel like other people are more insightful, capable, and well-read. But this was the one instance where it really struck me. This made me feel inadequate, and I have been doubting my competency ever since. Am I good enough to succeed at university? Do I even deserve to be here? I genuinely don’t think I deserve to be at university, especially one so prestigious. (Student 2, diary 1)

Doing badly (not that bad to be honest, just in terms of the standards I set myself) in an assignment taught me that University is hard and that I don’t need to be scared of not performing perfectly like I did in school, because I realised that doing badly in one small thing does not cancel out all the hard work I have put into all my other assignments this year. (Student 4, diary 4)

The prominence of the “self” category in the diary data suggests that students used the exercise to explore their feelings, positive and negative, about adjusting to the new academic demands of the tertiary setting. In particular, the two excerpts illustrate that the construction of self is primarily achieved through comparison to others.

Situation: Similarly, under the “situation” category, what featured most heavily were excerpts coded as “adjusting to tertiary level study” (e.g., general situations such as finding university coursework “intimidating” – Student 1, diary 2), with only two coded as “adjusting to online learning”, i.e., students acknowledging the relevance of the COVID-impacted online environment. For example, Student 5 acknowledges the specific context of online learning and teaching:

During the induction for history (which was live) there were over three hundred people in attendance which, to me, was quite a dramatic change compared to my secondary school's population being only around 2x that number. Because it was my first online 'class'; I found it quite difficult to concentrate on what all the lecturers were explaining about the course because I was only starting to adjust to the set-up—especially because of the chatbox that kept popping up. (Student 5, diary 1)

The challenge specific to the online environment seems therefore to be the initial lack of familiarity with the system. However, the student also mentions the sheer size of the lecture, which is not specific to the online environment—it is something that many first-year students are likely to experience in a large lecture theatre. The factor of situation, therefore, seems to transcend a particular instance and allows us as analysts to consider the wider implications of the event, linking it to the university experience as a whole.

Support: Most frequently mentioned in the diary data were examples of “peer support with academic work”, i.e., the usefulness of engaging with peers (either online or face to face) to seek support and reassurance with seminar preparation and coursework. However, what also emerged were examples of students reporting a distinct *lack* of support from both peers and staff, sometimes linked to the wider pandemic situation as in the first example below, but also irrespective of that, as in the second:

I haven't made any friends at university. Not a single one. It's not surprising, seeing as there is no way for me to meet anyone. I still live with my parents and lack of live lectures and the lockdown prevents me from going to [university city]. (Student 2, diary 3)

Everyone in the [university] group chats were shocked by how difficult it was and that we were expected to do it independently. For me, this highlighted the difference between secondary school and university education—of course in university we have support, but the difference is we are responsible for our own learning and studying, rather than being spoon-fed everything like we were at school. (Student 4, diary 1)

Strategies: By far what emerged most frequently were students' reflections on “time management and planning,” often relating to the need to implement good planning techniques to cope with the workload, which was unlike that at secondary school:

This semester, to me, was the hardest one to go through. Not because the work had gotten more difficult, but because of the amount of work that needed to be done. [...] I planned the month of march on a sheet of paper in February and because I had given myself deadlines, I was more organized, content and had given myself free time. (Student 5, diary 4)

### *Interviews with diary participants*

Situation: As we outlined, our rationale for follow-up interviews with our diary participants towards the end of the academic year was to give them an opportunity to look retrospectively on the whole year, and to delve further where they so wished about events they felt had been particularly pertinent. As seen above in the diary entries where students themselves chose what they wished to write about, in response to a very general prompt, the impact of Covid emerged far less than expected, and often only implicitly. However, these students did share many experiences when specifically asked about COVID during the follow-up interviews, with the sub-theme “general impact of covid” featuring most heavily in the “situation” category, for example issues of low motivation, boredom, and monotony, as well as the importance of the university campus as a physical space:

[Being on campus] definitely makes you feel like you’re actually in school, because I know a couple of my friends have been like, “Oh, we don’t feel like we’re actually in uni because it’s all online”, so we haven’t actually processed that we’re doing schoolwork. (Student 5)

More consistent with their diary data was the frequent discussion in the interviews of “adjusting to tertiary level study”, i.e., somewhat more universal issues unrelated to the pandemic. For example, universal academic challenges (i.e., those disconnected from the pandemic) included students’ concerns about the shift they felt had taken place, comparing their secondary- and tertiary-level experiences, in the amount of independent learning now required. Indicative comments include:

[...] at school, they would, like, force you because they know that if you didn’t you wouldn’t, whereas here, of course, it’s—you’re just expected to [...] nobody was checking that I was doing it, so there was no pressure on me to do it. (Student 3)

it was definitely difficult at the start [...] but once I started setting myself a routine and, like, a timetable for when to do certain things, it definitely got a bit easier [...] I kind of got a gist of how much I should be reading, and

how much of the recommended reading that maybe I don't have to look into. (Student 4)

These excerpts indicate the challenge that these new expectations pose for incoming students, but also on a more positive note (in the second excerpt) how students can gradually adjust.

Self: Also consistent with the diary data was that “overcoming worries about academic capacity” and “experiencing procrastination” were the most prominent two themes in this category. In terms of students’ sense of self regarding the first, the relevance of the pandemic was absent, and was more related to the nature of the academic transition from secondary to tertiary, as in the following excerpt:

I think I’ve learned that I can do a lot more work than I thought [...] now that I’m in university and I’ve been given like a lot more workload, I realised that, actually, I’m capable of doing all of this, and it’s not as scary and intimidating as maybe it was when I was looking at it from a non-experienced kind of perspective before university. (Student 4)

In terms of “overcoming procrastination,” students’ reports were mixed, on whether this interacted with the pandemic or not, as exemplified in turn by each of these excerpts:

I learned that I’m really bad at making myself do work [...] since we can’t go out and do stuff we’re obviously spending a lot more time, like, on our phones, so we become more addicted to our phones. (Student 3, interview)

for secondary school I didn't really have to study at all. And I, like, think going to university you obviously—Like, it requires you to be more diligent in your work. And I've spent way too much time, like procrastinating and not doing my work. (Student 2)

Support: In this interview data, there were slightly more instances of students discussing a *lack* of support from both staff and peers, than positive examples thereof. While there was more nuance relating to the lack of staff support, i.e., whether or not it related to COVID-specific situation, or the transition to university more generally where students perceived there being less staff guidance and input than in secondary school (again, akin with the diary data), what came through strongly in the sub-theme of “lacking peer support” was how this was driven by the pandemic:

[...] I think without the social aspect, university is just a bit sad. And life, honestly, is just a bit sad without socialising. Again, that is another reason why I think motivation—people are struggling with motivation this year, it's just because all we have is learning. We don't really have much else. (Student 4)

I tried a bit to, like, socialise with people in like—the course, like, group chats and stuff, but that—I don't—it wasn't done super well, it wasn't—like, very interesting and it didn't feel like I was making new friends or anything of the sort, so, like, at some point I just, like, stopped doing it. (Student 2)

Strategies: While, consistent with the diary data, a prominent sub-theme was “time management and planning,” what also emerged in these interviews was a clear sense of lecture recordings as a positive aspect of online learning. Students discussed the strategies they developed in relation to this resource:

I really struggle with concentrating so I'll—especially the fact that, like on Zoom you can slow down a recording and things, so I find that really, really, really helpful, and like, the closed captions I think are really, really beneficial and not just for me, but, of course, like people hard of hearing. (Student 3)

#### *Interviews with non-diary participants*

Support: For these supplementary interviewees, i.e., those who had not also completed the diaries, the most prevalent category was “support.” The most frequently reported sub-theme that emerged was a sense of “lacking peer support,” i.e., feeling that they have missed out on opportunities for peer interaction. Largely, interviewees reported this resulting from the pandemic, either relating to interaction in online seminars, or lacking opportunities to interact socially in person outside the classroom:

that's been the most devastating thing about the whole process, that I've been—I've found myself, time and time again, sat in group chats in my seminars and the tutor has asked a question and it's just been silence—just silence. (Student 10)

So it was literally just, like, you knew the people in your own flat [...] you're just like- with them all the time because it's that's the only people, really, that you know. (Student 8)

I haven't really had the opportunity at all to mix with anybody. (Student 10)

Also prominent was “lacking staff support,” which, as with the diary participants’ interview data, indicated a mix between this being irrespective of and linked to, COVID. Particularly interesting was the requirement from interviewees for ongoing transitional support beyond the first-year stage, which was an example of the links with the pandemic:

I don't think that, like, the transition period from [secondary school] to university has been very easy for anybody. I think—I don't know, I feel like I was just thrown in the deep end with this one, so I would love if, like people had a bit more support, especially for second years, even though—like, we've already done a year of university. I don't feel like it was real university, so I think that, like, extra support would be nice, just in terms of, like, what is expected and just even the basic things of like ‘how to write a good essay.’ (Student 13)

Despite there being a slightly stronger sense of a *lack* of support from peers and staff, there were also examples of support from these groups, for example the following student whose excerpt appears to exemplify the shift in this transition to tertiary from secondary, in terms of being independent and actively needing to seek out support:

I think my seminar tutors have been so understanding and very helpful [...] I knew that if I asked for it, the help is there. (Student 13)

Situation: The most commonly emergent sub-theme was “general impact of COVID”, and what these interviewees reported often paralleled the diary participants’ interviews. Both groups discussed the difficulty in making friends, not getting the chance to have a “real” university experience, feeling disconnected from the university, and how online socialising tools were not a sufficient replacement for face-to-face interaction. As one student explained:

you know the freshers of this year, just coming over here you just, sort of, had [the social] bit taken out of uni life, so all that was really left of it was really, in essence, the work. [...] You know, that just—it wasn't the same, you know, when you'd heard so many stories about what, you know, uni life was like and, you know, how it would be fun, it would be liberating, you get to do so many things, join different clubs, try new things and then, when you come, like, there's a lockdown and, you know, it just sort of hits you

that, you know, it's not going to be normal and you're not going to get that experience that other people have had, and it definitely does negatively affect you, because—you know, you'll be thinking, you know, how unlucky you are as a person that, you know, you'd have this for your first year. (Student 11)

As well as these elements clearly related to the pandemic, what also emerged within this category were elements of “adjusting to tertiary level study,” which gave more of a sense of some of the general (i.e., non pandemic-specific) academic challenges, such as difficulties coping with the university workload:

[at secondary level] it wasn't like chapters and chapters of stuff, whereas at uni, I mean I know you told us to kind of skim read stuff, and that makes sense, and there is a method to that, but there's just—it's a lot more to take in [...] yeah, it's a step up, but you kind of yeah, you adapt, you know, it's fine, it's fine, it's good. (Student 12)

Strategies: The deployment of strategies at this transitional phase was largely consistent between this cohort of supplementary interviewees, and the diary participants above—again what emerged was the importance of “time management and planning,” as well as the appreciation for “use of lecture recordings” as a study aid, advocating for their retention beyond COVID. Student 6 gave a sense of the interaction between these two sub-themes, discussing the importance of good planning, given the step-up at the tertiary level of independent learning and study skills:

I decided to just this semester stick with minimal notes, but also like, watching the lectures a lot more, and it would depend on my timetable, of course, but sometimes, if I had too much on one day, and I knew it would be too much, I would move that to another day and I would stick to that routine. And [...] I have a wall and it has one section for [each subject] and it has all these timetables for some of my subjects it didn't have a timetable, so I had to make one for myself, and that's what really, like, helped me, I realise it helped me a lot, so I do think I will keep doing this if they don't provide a timetable for me. (Student 6)

Self: Aligned with the diary participants' data, a prevalent sub-theme within the “self” category was students reporting instances of “overcoming worries about academic capability,” examples of which were largely dissociated from the impact of the pandemic:



If I don't make these mistakes now it's going to be more serious in the later years [...] even if you don't think you are, you are adapting and you are learning something, although at the moment, it can be hard to see it because you're just hating every moment of the stress of it. (Student 7)

What was interesting about these supplementary interviews was the “experiencing resilience” sub-theme, not identified within the other cohort's diary or interview data—as with other sub-themes, instances of “experiencing resilience” were mixed between those which students explicitly linked to the pandemic (Students 11 and 12), and those independent from it (Students 8 and 9).

## RESEARCH QUESTION 2

In addition to exploring the emergent sub-themes under the 4S categories, we also coded the diary participants' interviews separately for reflections on keeping a reflective diary throughout their first year, with a particular interest in reflective writing as a method, based on students' views of what they had gained (if anything) from the practice.

The sub-themes emergent under the “reflective writing” category were as follows, from most to least frequent:

- Reflection for personal development
- Resistance to reflection with peers
- Deciding what to reflect on
- Ambivalence about the value of reflective writing
- Value of learning from other's reflections

In terms of reflective writing for personal development, there was evidence that the advantages of this practice included making sense of past experiences, acknowledging one's development over time, and even allaying concerns or anxieties:

I think it was quite handy for being able to—well, get a bit more of an overhead view of what has actually happened in the past—however long—because it's quite easy to think we get to the end of a term, “Oh, that's done, forget about it, you know, it's finished”—Aye. But when you get a chance to look back at something that's happened that's actually showing you—You know, this is—If something's changed, you know, personally, for the better, you're evolving as a human being and all that, I think that's been quite handy. [...] it's been good for being able to look at things that maybe I've been worried about to begin with or like a particular seminar class or a bit

of work that maybe I've not been able to do on time or whatever, and being able to think how worrying about that was probably not necessary. (Student 1)

This student's views appear particularly important amidst increasing mental health concerns among student populations, as they suggest that reflective writing is a possible technique for managing stress and concerns associated with university.

An interesting contradiction was the sub-theme of "resistance to reflection with peers," contrasting with "value of learning from others' reflections," suggesting that while students would be hesitant to share their own reflective writing with peers, they would nonetheless enjoy reading what others had written. There was a strong consensus among the five that writing for strangers (i.e., us staff, whom the students only knew in the context of the study) was far easier than writing for anyone they knew well. As one student explained:

I think it's easier to write for a stranger than someone that you know, because if it's someone that you know you might feel inclined to say something or not say something, whereas, with a stranger you just say it how it is, and how you feel without interfering with anyone else. (Student 5)

The final sub-themes relate to some uncertainty around reflective writing, namely students reporting having on some occasions found it difficult "deciding what to reflect on," and a more general sense of "ambivalence about the value of reflective writing." The following is an indicative comment about not being sure what writing offers, that cognitive reflection does not:

I don't think putting it into writing as much—because, like—we all, I think—I feel like we all self-reflect like in our head—so I don't know if putting into writing—makes it any different, you know? (Student 3)

## **Discussion**

With some issues students raised, there was ambiguity over whether they related specifically to transitioning to university during the pandemic or were referencing a more general phenomenon. This could be because for these students, transitioning during the pandemic was their *only* experience of university, so for them, certain issues were inextricably linked with it. It could be argued that certain issues were those universally experienced by students during university transition, irrespective of this time of crisis. The data demonstrated how intertwined the transitional

process into tertiary education was with the transition into a new reality of lockdowns and other measures provoked by the pandemic. What emerged more strongly was a sense of isolation (i.e., a lack of peer and staff support at university, both inside and outside the classroom) which related more concretely to the COVID-19 situation. This aligns with Buckley et al.'s (2021) findings regarding online learning engendering a sense of loneliness, and Sigurdardottir et al.'s (2023) findings about the greater social challenges faced by young people during the pandemic. Our participants' perceptions regarding not "actually" feeling like a student (Student 5, interview) were not due so much to the impact on the academic aspect of university, but rather to the social aspect being so constrained during the pandemic. This offers interesting insight into the issue of 'role change' (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 70) inherent within transitions, in that our participants reported this sense of not properly embodying their new role of university student.

While our data was collected during the pandemic, there is nonetheless evidence of both "universal" aspects to the move into tertiary education, irrespective of the wider pandemic context, as well as principles and practices which emerged during COVID, which are worth retaining, for example:

- understanding transitions as an ongoing process (e.g., Briggs et al., 2012), such as more concretely supporting the move from first year into second year (especially given that this COVID-impacted first year didn't feel like 'real university'—Student 13).
- using lecture recordings to support learning, which under the category of "strategies" emerged strongly as a helpful learning tool—this aligns with Turnbull et al.'s (2021) argument about the value of blended learning practices.

Relating to the applicability of the theoretical framework itself, we noted that the different factors do not seem to affect individuals equally. For example, one might expect the "situation" to be prevailing in what was often referred to as the time of crisis. However, the diary data showed a great importance of the consideration of "self."

Writing can help capture key elements of student life. Diary entries provided useful insight into what our participants considered key in the process of adjusting to university life, and, as noted above, somewhat surprisingly, the time of crisis did not feature prominently in the responses. This reflective writing process appeared to give students the chance to reflect on issues that were more universal to the transitional experience. The diary prompt facilitated recall of incidents which students may not have engaged with otherwise. "Self" emerging as the most prevalent 4S category within the diary data indicates that this reflective writing exercise offered these students a chance to explore themselves and their experiences

at this pivotal life stage. We therefore maintain the importance of dialogic reflective practice. Perhaps given that at the time students could not freely interact with peers, the interviews opened up space for them to work through and deal with some of the issues they had experienced. As noted above, we found it interesting that while our diary participants were open to the possibility of learning from peers' reflective writing, they were hesitant at the idea of sharing their own. This offers further nuance on Thompson et al.'s (2021, pp. 1403-1404) finding that students place importance on discussing experiences and concerns with peers and close friends.

### **Implications for practice**

Upon the project's completion, we distributed a summary of findings to our faculty colleagues to inform practices supporting incoming students transitioning to university during an ongoing time of unprecedented crisis. Outlined in this communication with colleagues were our findings reinforcing the notion of certain "universals" in the transitional process to higher education which transcended the pandemic-specific context. Many of these align with Williams and Roberts' (2023, pp. 1138-1139) findings regarding the 'awkwardness' that students entering into higher education can experience. Academic staff need to be aware of this and need to reflect on how best to respond pedagogically and pastorally. Through our dissemination of findings and subsequent recommendations, we hope to have raised staff awareness of these challenges associated with university transitions, and to encourage their careful and considered reflection on their practices with incoming undergraduate students. Schaeper (2020) and Rosman et al. (2020) point out that staff interactions with students can be so powerful in shaping students' thinking about themselves as effective and capable learners. This bore out in our data within the "support" category, where students wrote about/discussed instances relating to their interaction with staff during the transitional phase.

In summary, we are therefore arguing for the need to actively engage with what can be learned from that time of crisis to help staff and students move forward by understanding fundamental experiences, namely the issues that consistently remain core to transitional processes (Thompson et al., 2021, p. 1406). Furthermore, current research exploring transitions in young people's lives suggests the likelihood of long-term social, psychological, and emotional impacts of COVID (Austin et al., 2024; Curtis et al., 2023; Sigurdardottir et al., 2023, p. 349). While the pandemic has (arguably) ended, the focus on support strategies will continue to be relevant for students and educators.

### **Directions for future research**

On the basis of this analysis and interpretation of findings, we suggest that future research focuses on using the 4S framework to understand the relevant aspects of self, situation, support, and strategies that students transitioning into higher education in years that are firmly classed as “post-pandemic,” to understand what the enduring impact of COVID-19 may be. For young people who undertook secondary education studies during the most acute lockdown measures, for example, what impact has this had on their capacity to adjust to tertiary education, both academically and socially? Using this framework to capture these transitional experiences would contribute to the current research agenda of seeking to understand the ongoing impact of the pandemic on young people. Furthermore, our work has demonstrated the value of capturing transitions over time, in line with our understanding of the phenomenon as becoming.

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