

# ‘Be prepared and give it a go!’ Transitions into further education for learners with additional learning needs

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Transitions in education are known to have an impact on learners both in social and emotional terms as well as academically. This article argues that transition experiences should be regarded as an on-going process rather than a one-off event. The move from compulsory education at the age of 16 can have a significant impact on engagement and retention, particularly for learners with additional learning needs (ALN), yet this is an underexplored area. While the transition from compulsory education to a further education (FE) setting brings increased independence, new opportunities and the emergence of adulthood, it can also be a time of trepidation and uncertainty for all learners, including those with ALN. Using an interpretive methodology, the voices of key stakeholders in the transition to FE from one setting were recorded to explore and inform good practice. Data were gathered using online questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. Findings ascertained the value of nurturing effective practitioner–learner relationships in preparation for transition, the importance of developing peer support networks and the provision of a central, safe space that is accessible to learners with ALN at all times.

**Key words:** transition, further education, additional learning needs, special educational needs, collaborative inquiry

## Introduction

Transition needs to be considered from a holistic, life-long perspective, rather than being viewed as a single, one-off event, and the evaluation and analysis of transition should be considered over a period of time (Downes et al., 2018). In preparing learners with additional learning needs (ALN) for the transition from compulsory education to further education (FE), it is vital that in the move to the new setting the level of disruption is minimal in terms of support systems, quality learning environments, welcoming learners and preventing discrimination, while also recognizing the opportunities that the new setting may offer. In Wales, an individual can leave school on the last Friday in June as long as they turn 16 by the end of that school year's summer holidays, although the Wales Centre for Public Policy (2022) recently commissioned research to consider how to raise the participation age in education. In recent years there has been an expansion in the courses offered at FE settings, to include academic courses in addition to vocational qualifications (Smothers et al., 2021). As a result, FE attracts learners for a multitude of reasons: to gain the skills necessary to enter or re-enter the job market; to progress to higher education; as an alternative to sixth form provision in school; as well as offering an opportunity to recover from poor school experiences. Despite the growth in FE numbers, there is little research on the experiences of learners particularly in relation to transition. The premise of the current article is to question whether current planning and practices in one FE setting are effective in supporting learners with Additional Learning Needs ALN. ALN is the legal term used in Wales to refer to children and young people with a learning difficulty or disability which calls for additional learning provision as they have significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or have a disability that prevents them from making use of facilities for education or training generally provided for others of the same age.

Considering the transition of learners into post-16 provision requires recognizing that this is a period of exploration and new-found independence, intertwined with education and prospective employment (Gaona et al., 2018). Ecclestone (2008, cited in Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019) suggests that in the process of transition a learner both 'becomes somebody' while also 'unbecoming', and that while the prospect of this identity shift can be exciting, for some it can be a daunting and difficult process. A positive transition experience can dramatically increase retention, and sustain motivation and engagement, thus increasing academic potential (Welsh Government, 2018). However, the challenge is recognizing what constitutes a successful experience. While it is

important to recognize that post-school transition can present many challenges for all young people and their families as established home-school relationships and school support provisions decrease, there is a need for better understanding of the function of the wider system to support the individual appropriately. This transition also encompasses emerging explorations of issues in identity formation, questioning personal values and ascertaining future aspirations (Morris & Atkinson, 2018), which can make the transition process difficult for some.

A primary focus of research on educational transition has been the impact on learners, particularly those in compulsory education (Davis et al., 2015; Ecclestone, 2008; Galton & McLellan, 2018; Packer et al., 2020; Perry & Dockett, 2011; Sutherland et al., 2010; Symonds, 2015; Topping, 2011) and higher education (Bradley, 2012; Brooman & Darwent, 2013; Coertjens et al., 2017; Gale & Parker, 2012), with very little exploration of transition experiences into post-16 settings such as FE institutions and sixth form colleges. There is a gap in the literature about transition from several perspectives. There is a paucity of research analyzing the processes of transition from compulsory to post-16 provision, investigating how transition is conceptualized from the lived experiences of both learners and practitioners (McLellan & Galton, 2015), and finally on exploring transition in the context of ALN. Exploration of transition from these perspectives can enable greater insight into the factors required to make the move successful, both in terms of academic engagement and in supporting retention by addressing the social and emotional needs of learners.

This article explores the transition experiences of learners with ALN into an FE establishment by listening to the voices of those involved in the process, namely practitioners (lecturers and transition officers) and learners, using a case study approach. The FE establishment is in South Wales and delivers vocational education and training, both full-time and part-time, in addition to offering general education along more traditional routes (GCSE and AS/A levels). The establishment in question is one of the largest colleges in the UK and has over 30,000 learners enrolled on a wide range of courses operating over six campuses. In addition to raising their own income, the Welsh Government provides funding for all FE colleges in Wales. In 2015/2016, 133,870 learners were enrolled on FE courses in all modes of study, with part-time learners forming a significant majority (Stats Wales, 2016).

## Literature review

Ensuring a good transition experience needs to consider learners' needs in a more holistic way, ensuring that their emotional, physical, cognitive and social wants are met in addition to academic requirements. This can be viewed by drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, developed as a system of a series of concentric circles, with the individual at the centre. In its application there is a distinct focus on the micro-system of the learner at the heart of the process (conceptualized in the learner voice), the meso-system of the setting (conceptualized in gathering the voices of all stakeholders), the exo-system of governmental policy and the macro-system in the context of international research into educational transitions. This article focuses on the micro- and meso-systems, by investigating stakeholder perspectives on transition experiences from compulsory education to FE. This method has facilitated reflection on the impact of experiences, particularly in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, on both learner and practitioner alike. Applying Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems model as a theoretical framework for understanding transition enables the exploration of the roles and influences of all stakeholders involved in the learner's transition. It facilitates an amelioration of the complexity and range of transitions a learner may experience in listening to different perspectives. From the learner perspective, this has encapsulated an evaluation of the transition experience in terms of engagement and commitment to the FE institution and to their course, and from the practitioner perspective, it sheds light on the impact of online delivery on participation and identification with the FE institution.

In effecting successful transition and inclusivity, Davis et al. (2015) note evidence of the value of 'communities' where all stakeholders are included and practice acknowledges the need to respond to learner diversity. In this context, the learner does not exist in isolation but is influenced by the environment, relationships with others and culture. Recognizing the impact of transition is essential for understanding how these influences on the individual and their interacting dynamics can serve to inform effective communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). This allows practitioners involved in the transition process from both school and FE settings to work collaboratively in facilitating the transition process. Working in this way enables a framework of thinking about transition within social dimensions and the empowerment of those involved to develop a cohesive approach (Packer et al., 2020). Recent reforms to ALN in Wales have brought together a new statutory support system for young people aged 0 to 25 years with the

aim of ensuring greater continuity and consistency in provision (Knight & Crick, 2021), drawing on person-centred approaches and increasing collaboration between settings.

A successful transition experience can serve to facilitate retention and encourage increased motivation and engagement with study as learners are able to access the new environment, meet practitioners and make informed choices (Welsh Government, 2018; Holtom & Lloyd-Jones, 2012; DfES, 2007). Continued education and training remain key in the maintenance and development of a skilled workforce, career progression and social integration (The Northern Powerhouse Partnership, 2018; Maurice-Takerei, 2017; Ludwig-Mayerhofer et al., 2019). While the purpose of the study was to ascertain the effectiveness of transition processes from both learner and practitioner perspectives, approaches that encourage the use of learner voice can also be viewed as promoting increased social equality, engagement and commitment to the setting (Browne & Millar, 2019). Developing opportunities for increased interaction between participants not only highlights practices for the purposes of research but can also serve to develop reciprocal relationships between participants. Grobler and Wessels (2016) comment that ALN learners often require more individual attention, which may have a negative influence on the learner–practitioner relationship. While Grobler and Wessels’ (2016) focus is the school environment, it can be argued that providing opportunities to listen to the voices of learners with ALN can be challenging when additional support might be needed to enable the articulation of experiences and opinions. However, such opportunities, particularly at times of key change, opens up dialogue about the transition experience as well as providing a means of reflection. It also serves to reinforce the relationship between the learner and the setting.

In preparing for transition, Zhang (2021) notes that challenges may arise between what is expected of the learner and what they are able to do. Not being prepared and being unaware of expectations may undermine confidence and motivation. If practitioners are unaware of, or do not address, learner needs, this can be further aggravated. It is therefore important that learners have an understanding of the expectations at the new setting and are aware of typical routines (for example, the typical day). The Covid-19 pandemic has increased potential challenges related to transition, with predicted impact upon mental health (Bignardi et al., 2021), increased economic uncertainty, and the widening of social, economic and educational inequalities (Engzell et al., 2021). Further compounding the risk of disengagement and inequality, the emergence of online

learning as a tool to engage with learning was particularly challenging for learners with ALN (Valvi et al., 2020). As learners with ALN are more likely to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, there is an argument for an increased focus on this group of learners to reduce impact and increase opportunity for engagement by ensuring that they are prepared for a tailored transition process that is sensitive to individual needs (Shaw et al., 2016).

Kiuru et al. (2020) acknowledge the value of positive relationships as protective features associated with successful transition, identifying the importance of the family, a good peer network and the nurturing of practitioner–learner relationships, thus recognizing that development does not occur in isolation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Having a stable and reliable relationship network supports the changes in the learner’s micro-system that happen as a result of transition (Timperley et al., 2003). The quality of the learner’s interpersonal relationships enables the individual to cope with the uncertainty associated with change and to build upon previous experiences of transition (Warren & Harden-Thew, 2019). This is even more important for learners with ALN, who may find it difficult to form new relationships with peers and find the transition process difficult. Being able to rely on existing connections as a springboard to change can make navigation of the new setting easier. The challenge is ensuring that learners with ALN are developing independence during this process rather than becoming over-reliant on the support available.

Fostering independence among learners with ALN, and enabling them to become active participants in their own learning, requires careful consideration of the environment in addition to the support systems available. Greenman (2005) identifies four pillars of security – people, place, routine and ritual – that provide comfort in the face of challenging events. Developing relationships with key stakeholders, managing expectations and exploring typical routines have already been discussed. Ensuring the learner with ALN has an opportunity to explore the environment is important in enabling them to visualize themselves at the new setting and can begin to foster a sense of belonging. Learners with ALN can often feel insecure, and providing designated safe spaces for learners to access independently support an individual’s desire to move away from a group if they feel a need for space, while also encouraging self-regulation (Capo et al., 2019).

Drawing upon the voices of learners with ALN and practitioners at the setting provided an opportunity to listen to the transition experiences of the facilitators (practitioners) and the participants (learners). Using

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems theory provided a lens by which to view the experience from the learner perspective and to better understand the role of the practitioner in supporting the move (change in environment) and impact on the learner (social, emotional and academic).

## **Methodology**

### *Research design*

In identifying the gap in the literature on the transition into FE and support for learners with ALN, the purpose of the study was to explore both learner and practitioner perceptions concerning the effectiveness of transition from formal education to post-16 provision. A case study approach was adopted to allow 'an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the "case") in depth and within its real-world context' (Yin, 2015). This offers an opportunity for knowledge mobilization, whereby findings from research become activated and impact upon policy and practice (Morvan & Smith, 2020). The chosen research design also seeks to explore experiential knowledge of a situation by prioritizing the subjective meanings that participants attribute to a specific context and, in doing so, both provides a rich description and facilitates the participant voice (Chadderton & Torrance, 2011; de Vaus, 2001; Cohen et al., 2011). While it is acknowledged that previous research has adopted a more longitudinal approach to researching the field of educational transitions (for example, Jindal-Snape et al., 2011; Rice et al., 2011), due to the aforementioned lack of research both in the context of FE and among learners of ALN, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data and exploring an array of perspectives took precedence to explore the complexity of this area.

### *Methods and sample*

Data were gathered using online questionnaires, followed by focus groups with learners and interviews with practitioners within the FE college, to gather the perspectives and experiences of those involved in the transition into FE. The focus groups and interviews took place via Microsoft Teams due to Covid-19 restrictions. Collecting data in two stages – that is, questionnaires and then focus groups/interviews – allowed an iterative process to develop the later-stage interview/focus group questions through early and initial analysis of emerging themes from the questionnaire data. While the questionnaire focused on factors affecting the decision to study in post-16 education, and the overall importance and effectiveness of transition activities, the purpose of the second phase of data collection was to

explore individual experiences and feelings prior to and during the transition process.

Participants were identified using non-probability, purposive sampling. Working with the senior additional learning support coordinator within the FE college, the first stage of recruitment was to distribute a questionnaire link electronically to all 109 learners at the FE college who had a Statement of Special Educational Need and were studying either a mainstream or discrete course (discrete courses are offered at pre-entry to level 1 and mainstream are primarily at levels 1 to 3). Similarly, 140 key practitioners involved in the transition process within the FE college were also invited to complete an online questionnaire. Responses were provided from lecturers and transition officers as well as those from across student services. In total, 69 learners and 93 members of staff completed the questionnaire, giving a response rate of 63% and 66% respectively, and a total sample size of 162 for the first stage of data collection.

In order to ethically recruit both learners and members of staff for the second phase of data collection, the final section of the questionnaire invited respondents to add their contact details if they were willing to be contacted about potential participation in the second phase of data collection, which involved either individual interviews or small focus groups. Therefore, a sample of 10, which included learners and practitioners, were involved in either an individual interview or small focus groups, depending on their preference. [Tables 1](#) and [2](#) clearly summarize the sample composition to indicate how many participants were learners and whether they were enrolled on a mainstream or discrete course, as well as the number of staff and their specific roles and responsibilities.

### *Ethics*

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the associated University via their Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. The gatekeeper

**Table 1: Number of learners involved in the second phase of data collection and whether enrolled on mainstream or discrete course**

Learner 1	Mainstream course
Learner 2	Discrete course
Learner 3	Mainstream course
Learner 4	Mainstream course
Learner 5	Discrete course



**Table 2: Roles and responsibilities of practitioners interviewed**

Role	Responsibilities
Transition Officer 1 /2	Liaising with schools to support learners with statements of special educational need to transition from school to the FE setting
Lecturer	Teaching and course tutor for learners studying at level 2/3. Has pastoral responsibilities for learners, some of whom have ALN
Additional Learning Support Coordinator	The day-to-day coordination of additional support assistants who support learner with ALN in and out of class. Based in ALN Hub (a space for learners accessible at all times)
Wellbeing Officer	Supporting learners with mental health and wellbeing difficulties across the setting. Signposts learners to appropriate external services

within the FE college was provided with an information letter detailing the purpose of the project, potential involvement and key ethical issues relating to the right to withdraw, confidentiality and anonymity. Once consent was gained from the gatekeeper, an email was sent on behalf of the researchers, to all relevant staff and learners, asking them to complete a questionnaire via a protected link to ensure anonymity. In order to participate in the second phase of data collection – that is, focus groups/interviews – respondents could voluntarily provide their contact details at the end of the questionnaire to receive relevant information about their potential involvement. Due to the involvement of learners with ALN, all research tools were piloted by the gatekeeper for accessibility purposes to ensure informed consent. In addition, learners were asked in advance if they would feel more comfortable taking part in either an individual interview or a focus group, or to have another familiar person present. A verbal brief was provided and verbal consent was also confirmed at the start of the interview/focus groups to ensure the learner participants in particular had ample opportunity to ask any questions or choose to withdraw. All interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. All data were stored on a secure cloud storage system that was accessible only to the researchers on the project (BERA, 2018).

*Data analysis*

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics for closed questions and thematic analysis for any qualitative comments. However, due to the sample size, we could not undertake full statistical analysis. The

qualitative data were analyzed thematically, with a focus on explaining some of the quantitative data, but also, more importantly, to explore additional emerging themes. As Braun and Clarke (2006) maintain, thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing and reporting themes found in a data set. Using this process enabled a systematic approach to organizing the data, which allowed the perspectives of all research participants to be considered and cross-referenced with identified themes (Nowell et al., 2017). In analyzing the qualitative data, the researchers also adopted an interpretive methodology to infer meaning from participant responses and how perceived realities shaped experiences of transition (Coe et al., 2017). Analysis and subsequent categorization of the data into themes enabled the transition process to be explored holistically, rather than a snapshot of individual responses (Tett et al., 2017). The researchers separately explored and analyzed the different sets of data, and, through an iterative process, themes were expanded and defined as the following:

1. being prepared for transition;
2. developing effective relationships;
3. ensuring safe spaces for learners.

## **Results and discussion**

Results are presented and analyzed drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems theory to guide thinking about the interpretation of the data. Three key themes were identified. First is the pre-cursor in the agitation of the individual's micro-system in terms of being prepared for the transition. In anticipation of the move to the FE setting learners are prepared for change. Second, in support of the re-configuring of the learner's micro- and meso-systems, is a focus on developing effective relationships. This is between the learner and his or her peers, and also between the learner and the practitioner(s). The third theme identified can be viewed as the settling of both micro- and meso-systems within the individual, through ensuring safe spaces, both environmentally and mentally, for learners, so that they feel at ease in the setting and know how to use the systems. Structuring in this way enables reflection on whether the FE setting's transition planning and practices are effective in supporting learners with ALN.

### *Being prepared for transition*

Learners are prepared for transition prior to moving to the setting as FE Transition Officers visit schools, liaise with practitioners and meet with learners. This is a new post trialed by the setting to improve the transition

experience, with impact upon retention and engagement. The Transition Officers develop working partnerships between schools and the FE setting, thus developing communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) whereby practitioners come together to discuss the transition process and how best to support learners (Davis et al., 2015):

*'We currently work with 41 schools across [area], so, you know, we're continuously building our relationships with them, sharing practice, what works, what doesn't work, so they kind of know what's expected from a staff view of the transition, and the student knows, and the ... you know, the family know'. (Transition Officer 1)*

Developing a tailored approach to transition and responding to individual need is seen as key; there is a need *'to make sure that, you know, it's a very person-centred approach to that learner'* (Transition Officer 1). For learners on discrete programmes the Transition Officer visits special schools in the surrounding area at least a year before the move to FE, working with practitioners, meeting with learners and arranging group visits, acknowledging the need for additional, tailored support (Grobler & Wessels, 2016):

*'I work with them [the school] a year ahead ... I transition all their paperwork ... I do the tours and visits and so my main job is to make sure that they have a safe transition from school to college with no anxieties and easing any issues ...' (Transition Officer 2)*

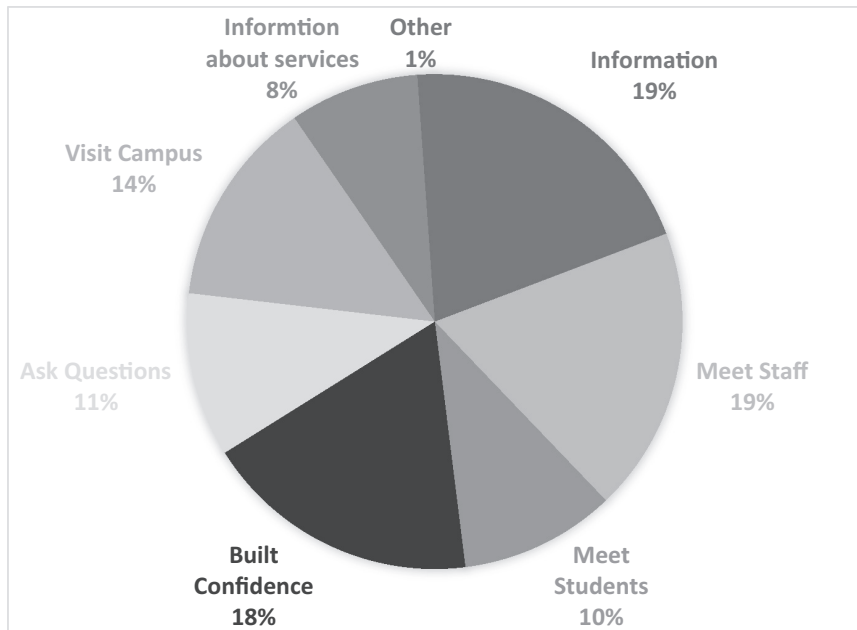
The visits provide opportunities for the Transition Officer to begin developing relationships with learners as a way to support the transition, focusing on supporting the micro-system of the learner in preparation for the move (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This was deemed a strength of the FE setting by both learners and practitioners alike in addition to the perception that the transition provided an 'opportunity for a fresh start'. Having an opportunity to meet with staff enabled the learners to feel more confident about attending the setting and was reflected in responses given by learners when asked what they most enjoyed about transition events.

When asked about transition events organized by the FE setting, around 60% of respondents had attended face-to-face transition events and 38% reported attending online transition events organized due to the Covid-19 restrictions (see Figure 1). Generally responses to the events (both face-to-face and virtual) were positive as they provided an opportunity to meet with key staff

and a chance to visit the setting. Providing learners with transition events can serve to quell emerging anxieties while also providing a point of contact for individuals. Engagement with the transition process demonstrates that contact with the FE setting before enrolling on courses is important in alleviating concerns or worries about the forthcoming move and facilitates a positive transition experience (Welsh Government, 2018).

When asked what was less successful about the transition events organized before attending the college, learners noted that too much information was disseminated during these sessions which they found difficult to process (36%). Also, it was noted there was a difficulty in meeting other learners and not being familiar with general software (potentially exacerbated by Covid-19). By listening to learner voice in evaluating the transition process, issues raised can be addressed by the setting, which in turn may promote increased engagement (Browne & Millar, 2019).

**Figure 1: What learners most enjoyed about the transition events**



Becoming familiar with the broader cultural environment was also a key element in the preparation for transition and part of the transition events themselves. Managing expectations and enabling learners to communicate needs and concerns helps to maintain confidence and provides assurance (Shaw et al., 2016). Learners with ALN noted that they were looking forward to becoming more independent (29%), developing their subject knowledge (27%), meeting new people (22%) and developing their academic skills (17%). This is supported by staff responses, noting that they thought learners were most looking forward to becoming more independent (33%), meeting new people (28%), developing subject knowledge (19%) and developing academic skills (15%). Some staff noted an opportunity to re-engage with education after potentially negative experiences at school and the prospect of building social skills, and ‘wanting to be treated like an adult’. There is a recognition of impending change from the learners’ comments, but this is viewed from a knowledgeable base, perhaps due to previous interactions with the setting or building upon former positive experiences (Kiuru et al., 2020).

Despite a generally positive outlook, key factors that excited learners about the prospect of FE study were replicated in concerns about starting at the setting: meeting new people (27%), finding the work too challenging (25%), not being able to find their way around the campus (23%) and not enjoying the course (19%). Some concerns were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic; as one learner noted, *‘I don’t like change and because of Covid had [sic] been home so long that I felt scared to leave the house’*. This resonates with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems theory as learners anticipate movement or changes to their meso- and micro-systems which can cause conflicting feelings such as anxiety, trepidation and excitement. One respondent noted that they were *‘worried I might not be ready to go to college and should have stayed in school’*. While the majority did not provide recommendations for improving the transition to college, a few suggestions included *‘a booklet with all teachers’ profiles and what my course entailed and a transition questionnaire’*, *‘more mental health wellbeing stuff, as I do deal with anxiety’* and a *‘talk about the college (with a map of the college) ... so people have a rough idea where everything is before going’*. It was clear from the responses that the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on how learners have managed the transition from school to college, with a number requesting that *‘if circumstances were different having more visits to college before starting’* and having a *‘one on one tour as many times as possible to improve confidence’*. This supports Greenman’s (2005) assertion that the four pillars of security need to be addressed in order to reassure learners’ concerns about forthcoming change.

### *Developing effective relationships – peer networks*

The physical move to a new setting can be daunting:

*'At first I was like absolutely scared. I didn't know what I was putting myself into, like, 'cause there were like ... I thought like all my friends were going to the same college as me but it actually wasn't and so I tried, I tried ... to like ... see if I could make new friends. I did but like yeah, right now it's just like tricky for me at the time but uh yeah it's like, yeah, so it was tricky at the beginning to make new friends'. (Learner 1, mainstream course)*

Recognizing learner anxieties about developing new friendship groups is acknowledged by practitioners, realizing the importance of *'forming that friendship bond'*. Many learners who commented were apprehensive about making new friends and being able to relate to practitioners while also looking forward to the challenge. One learner commented that they were *'looking forward to meeting my tutors, having new work to do and maybe making new friends'* (Learner 2, discrete course) but was finding meeting new people challenging due to the social distancing restrictions and online learning. Holtom and Lloyd-Jones (2012) recognize the importance of fostering meaningful relationships during transition, in terms of providing emotional support, enhancing learner confidence and assisting with practical issues, in order to maintain motivation and engagement.

Acknowledging the value of experience in supporting others, current students at the setting are encouraged to meet with incoming learners to share experiences and answer questions during the summer vacation. They can also explore the setting and meet with support staff. New learners appreciated the opportunity to talk freely with each other:

*'I got to meet students that had been there previously who had difficulties, and they just spoke with me, and it ... I will say like I was definitely extremely lucky that even before my journey actually started in college in September, I had a lot of support just before I even entered the college ...' (Learner 3, mainstream course)*

Keeping in Touch (KIT) days provide emotional and social support as well as practical information for learners and their parents. They serve several functions: providing support staff with an opportunity to meet with learners and parents again; alleviating any concerns that the learner or their parents might have; and ensuring that learners are feeling motivated and confident

about starting their courses in the new term. In reflecting on the KIT days, Transition Officer 1 commented that it was:

*'nice to see that a lot of the students who have settled with us, they act as mentors as well to a lot of my newbies coming through, which is always good'.*

However, despite the success of KIT days it is apparent that a key element of the event is being there in person to see the college and meet with other learners, as one learner commented that they would like *'not having to social [distance] but obviously there's coronavirus and not having help'* (Learner 1, discrete course). Opportunities to visit the campus are frequent, as staff: *'arrange that each member of staff will interview their own learner. So they have met him on a visit. Then they've met him at interview. So by the time [of] coming into college it should be second nature'*. (Transition Officer 1)

This helps to develop a sense of community, fostering the idea of belonging, which can serve to ensure engagement and motivation among learners (Davis et al., 2015).

#### *Developing effective relationships – parental involvement*

Parental involvement plays a key role in supporting the transition process. As Transition Officer 1 noted, they *'transition the parents, carers, guardians ... you know, along with the students'*. The KIT days provide parents with an opportunity to question practitioners about concerns and to provide further contextual information about their child, and for practitioners to explain the structure of the courses and expectations if necessary, and also to give parents an opportunity to explore the setting with their child. Transition Officer 2 noted:

*'their [the learners'] parents are invited as well so they go off with their teacher while I keep the parents and we discuss finance and things like that as well to put that at ease for the parents'.*

Good home–college liaison is important in ensuring needs are met:

*'So recently, I had one transition student's parent wrote to us, just for ... just giving us some more information about the student, and how they learn, and could we adapt things for the student, and ... and we're willing to do that'.* (Lecturer)

However, sensitivity is required in the way the home–college relationship is managed, recognizing that the transition to FE can symbolize a move towards adulthood with a need for increased independence and responsibility (Morris & Atkinson, 2018). This nevertheless can be a challenging time for learners as they leave the comfort and familiarity of their school life concerned that they are not ready to take the next step, and with less experience of autonomy and independence than might be expected of learners their age (Gaona et al., 2018). It is critical to ensure the correct balance of support and focus:

*‘I work with them a year ahead ... I transition all their paperwork ... I do the tours and visits and so my main job is to make sure they have a safe transition from school to college with no anxieties and easing any issues they’ve got at all ... It’s what’s important for that individual learner ... We can make it as bespoke as that individual wants it’.* (Transition Officer 2)

#### *Developing effective relationships – working with schools*

There was also an acknowledgement of the key role that schools, current FE learners and the wider educational community play in supporting the transition to the FE setting. Practitioners appreciated ‘links with feeder schools who arrange visits and sell the college to the learners’ and ‘really good friendships with a lot of schools’, and commented on the value of ‘word of mouth/recommendation from current and previous students as well as practitioners e.g. Careers Wales’. Working collaboratively not only focuses on schools but also working closely with other FE settings to ensure a common approach to transition. As Transition Officer 1 commented, ‘there’s been a lot of shared practice across, you know, our close colleges in Wales’. This resonates with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) Communities of Practice theory, whereby collaboration and support between settings facilitates the learner’s education trajectory. As the Wellbeing Officer noted:

*‘so then, when they started then, we had a pretty good idea of students’ needs, and what they were like as a person, and you know, make things better for them really’.*

#### *Ensuring safe spaces for learners*

The role of Transition Officers is key in enabling and empowering learners to make the transition to FE (Welsh Government, 2016; Holtom & Lloyd-Jones, 2012). Working with learners on an individual basis allows relationships to develop, enabling learners to express any concerns and worries so



that Transition Officers can tailor provision accordingly. Building relationships based on mutual trust was seen as important to learners and practitioners alike, as well as the provision of a safe space for learners to go should they require additional support or guidance, or just some time away from the daily hubbub of college life. The ALN hub in the setting provided learners with a sanctuary, a place where they could feel safe and seek advice without judgment. As one learner commented:

*'I'd sit in the hub and just chat to the people there, which I s... and initially it's like a little, I don't know, I call like a bubble, it's like a big room where you can just sit down and ... it's up to you really, it could be a study space, a safe space, anything.'* (Learner 3, mainstream course)

This was reiterated by a practitioner who stated that *'if they didn't want to come to me or their other tutors, they really felt that there was a safe place in college for them to go ...'* (Lecturer). The ALN hub is considered a space where learners can socialize and share problems or experiences:

*'for me I thought it was really cool, there was a Hub, there were people I could talk to that I'll be safe around, there were so much [sic] options if I need to talk to people, like the well-being'.* (Learner 1, mainstream course)

Ensuring that learners are aware of opportunities and spaces to seek support and guidance from the outset is viewed as an essential part of the transition process:

*'I think it's really important to make sure the transition process is correct, because for some learners it could mean the difference whether they come to college or not, because that's their first experience of what the college is going to be like for them as well'.* (Practitioner)

## Recommendations

In reflecting on the transition process, practitioners noted that they wished that information about individual learners was received earlier so that they could work with the school and the learner to tailor approaches to transition. This resonates with the work of Downes et al. (2018), who acknowledge the importance of the wider dimensions of transition, including the interplay of relations between individuals. Fostering good relationships was seen as an

essential component in the transition process, with one practitioner suggesting that as part of her role as a Transition Officer, she should be involved in teaching the learners as well. This would maintain an element of familiarity and potentially alleviate concerns while facilitating a supported move towards independence and identification as a FE learner (Gaona et al., 2018).

Transition support for learners with mental health issues was another recommendation made by practitioners, acknowledging that this is an area of growing concern, and not just for learners with ALN. As the Wellbeing Officer commented, *'there tends to be a high ... crossover with ALN and like mental health'* and that it *'would be, you know, really useful to like work with schools if they have got students that are very anxious or have got other like mental health issues'*. Organizing more sessions for learners either as bespoke ALN transition events or open evenings at the college or KIT days were noted as a recommendation for improvement by both practitioners and learners alike, as one practitioner noted, *'if they're particularly anxious learners, it may be helpful to have a few Keeping in Touch days'* (Additional Learning Support Coordinator). A learner commented, *'I would come to college more regularly because I only had one [taster session] ... to help me get used to it'* (Learner 2, discrete course). More sessions would also allow learners time to process information given; as one learner commented:

*'maybe you could limit the amount of information you give in one day, like you could give part of it in the morning, part in the afternoon, not have it all in one time'*. (Learner 2, discrete course)

It was also suggested that a staggered approach to transition could be used, by developing a transition app whereby learners could access information about the transition to college as well as listen to the experiences of others who have already made the transition to the setting.

## Conclusion

Evidence from the data gathered suggests that an inclusive approach to transition is critical, which involves a supportive, welcoming and caring environment, acknowledging the learner in a holistic way, while recognizing their individual needs. Within the transition framework operation is a need for a purposeful fostering of a sense of belonging to the setting, created through visits to the setting, opportunities to meet with peers and access to a variety of practitioners. Drawing upon the voices of key stakeholders promotes increased engagement and commitment to the setting, allowing for better social equality. Good

peer-to-peer relationships are encouraged prior and during the transition process in addition to interactions with practitioners so that professional relationships are developed and nurtured. In ensuring that the transition experiences are successful, effective communication between all stakeholders is essential in managing expectations and alleviating concerns and worries. Continuity is necessary so that support available at the point of transition is accessible during the learner's time at the setting. While the Covid-19 pandemic has challenged traditional transition processes, demanding a flexible approach in preparing all learners for transition, it has afforded new opportunities to support the transition process for all learners, including those with ALN. It is recognizing and reflecting on processes and consideration of stakeholders in provision that is key to ensuring positive transition experiences.

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