

GLASGOW



CALEDONIAN
UNIVERSITY

Moving Forward

**Enhancing progression through
partnership**

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Introduction

This report summarises the outcomes of the Student Focus Group event which was held as part of the Moving Forward initiative on 4 February 2008. Members of the CRLL Student Experience Project and College Articulation project provided significant support in the organisation and facilitation of the event: Vic Boyd, Frank Brown, Jim Leahy, Karen MacFarlane, Katherine Madden and Elizabeth Mooney. Additional help with facilitation and note-taking was provided by Sabine McKinnon, the Caledonian Academy, Ailie Ferarri, Marketing and Communications, and James Smith and Peter Kennedy from the School of Law and Social Sciences. The project team would like to thank all of these colleagues for their support and help.

A set of focus group questions was developed, which sought to explore the first year experience of students in relation to the pre-entry stage; transition to university; and learning, teaching & assessment.

The event was held in place of the rescheduled Moving Forward service design event. As it was organised at relatively short notice not all Schools were able to participate. Students were identified via the Heads of Learning, Teaching and Quality within the Schools and by the Students Association. 18 students participated which enabled 3 group discussions with students from School of Law and Social Sciences (LSS), School of Nursing, Midwifery and Community Health (NMCH) and a mixed group with students from School of Built and Natural Environment (BNE); School of Life Sciences (LS) and Caledonian Business School (CBS). The participant details analysis is attached as Appendix 1. The focus group questions are listed in Appendix 2.

Outcomes of focus group discussions

A summary of the key outcomes of the group discussion and the plenary discussion in relation to positive and negative aspects of the students' first year experience and suggestions and recommendations for enhancing this experience is provided below.

Pre-entry stage

Students considered that better pre-entry information and guidance was required on the nature of particular programmes, academic preparation and practical issues, such as finance and accommodation. Some students, particularly in Nursing, would have liked clearer idea of what is expected academically and found some subjects harder than expected.

The **reasons for choosing to study** at GCU included:

- Course information in prospectus looked most interesting
- Nice modern campus
- Family connections (siblings attended)
- Employability- heard that the course/university provides opportunities to gain practical skills, such as presentation skills; best university for nursing
- Support- heard that university has a department that offers help with making the transition from college to university ; 'friendliest university' - best response to queries
- Geographic reasons - Wanted to stay at home in Glasgow (financial reasons relating to accommodation costs; parental influence) ; easy access(transport)

For 12 of the 18 students GCU was their first choice. For those students for whom GCU was not their first choice, some had chosen other universities such as Glasgow University and St Andrews (because of reasons

relating to prestige) but did not get high enough grades or, due to high costs of accommodation, they needed to attend university in Glasgow rather than move away from home.

The **positive experience of students in relation to pre-entry information and guidance** included campus tours at the application stage -'liked the facilities and the atmosphere' and 'friendly welcome on day of the visit'; e-mail communication with questions about academic content of course and friendly helpful replies from academic staff; private visit arranged through programme leader; good on-line programme information; GOALS visits and open days; visits to college by university staff and student mentors; receiving user name and password in good time before arrival at GCU which made student feel part of the 'community of students' and gave access to resources prior to arrival. Those students who had prior contact with GCU before commencing their programme found this extremely useful. For one student the information they received about GCU prior to applying made the difference between whether or not they chose to study at GCU and helped to build confidence in the decision to apply for university.

Strategies and approaches highlighted by students to improve pre-entry information, guidance and preparation:

- More specific **visits from university staff and student mentors to schools and colleges** to provide guidance on finance, accommodation, childcare issues, as well as academic preparation.
- The value and effectiveness of the **GOALS project and FE/HE Mentoring** project was highlighted by students
- **Schools should offer better preparation** to pupils prior to starting university particularly in relation to referencing systems, avoiding plagiarism etc
- Information on the **university website** before students commence should be more tailored to particular Schools and programmes and **on-line opportunities for interaction** with other new students and existing students on the programme, student mentors and programme staff should be available for all new students **prior to starting at GCU**. This would assist the process of feeling part of the university before and immediately after arrival.
- The **Summer School option, and opportunities for pre-entry preparation** should be made available to all new students

Transition to university

The transition from college to university was perceived by students to be easier (when entering Level 1) than that of transition from school to university. Students coming from college felt they were encouraged to progress and were given clear information on what was expected of them academically at university. Students considered that college provides a better preparation than school in terms of the nature and format of coursework and time management. The independent learning students engaged in at college prepared them for university in a way in which the school environment would not have. However some students highlighted the fact that college provides a more supportive environment than university. The view was expressed that teaching staff at GCU are there if you need them but students have less access to them than they had to college teaching staff. In relation to independent learning, some students experienced difficulties at first but recognised it was 'good for you' in the longer term. The need to learn how to strike the 'right balance between seeking out support and doing it for yourself' was expressed.

There was a general lack of awareness of induction and most of the students had not participated in the induction programme. Those that did participate in induction considered it to be a very useful preparation.

Many of the students experienced initial difficulties in essay writing and the Effective Learning Service was considered helpful by some to assist them with this, particularly in relation referencing and bibliographies, which was new to most of them.

Some students had not expected problems with socialising and making friends and underestimated the effect this had in terms of feeling isolated and alienated at first. The initial difficulty of forming friendship groups was also highlighted by students in student resident accommodation.

Some students considered that more information on the work of Student Association would have been helpful at the beginning. One student 'discovered it by chance and thought it was just a bar'.

The **areas in which student would have liked more help** to support their transition, but did not know how to access it, included:

- Exams and exam technique
- How to write academic essays, including referencing
- More information on marking schemes and 'carrying' modules if you fail.
- More on the specific referencing criteria for nursing students which is different from other students.
- Blackboard
- Electronic Shelving System
- Athens
- Funding

Particular difficulties associated with transition to university were expressed by the nursing students. Some did not feel part of GCU at the beginning and 'because of the nursing semester system we felt like an inconvenience on occasions, particularly outwith normal teaching time (May, June July August) when labs were closed and facilities were not available'. Nursing students tend not to be involved in the 'university experience' as much due to work, placements, and family commitments. Because they are on a different semester system from other students they feel 'outside' the general student population. CELCAT timetables were difficult to understand, particularly as 'Week 1' was not Week 1 for nurses and there was no Fresher's week for nurses as the programme has already started. It was not explained at the beginning that Nursing students have different holidays to the rest of the student body which made it difficult to plan ahead, especially in relation to childcare arrangements. Poor communication between GCU and hospitals means short notice for placements which makes it difficult to forward plan and manage domestic issues.

Positive aspects of experience in relation to transition support include, the usefulness of induction as preparation for university and as a means of getting to know the academic staff; the Effective Learning Service was extremely helpful for some students; helpful and friendly academic staff and an informal atmosphere which helped relieve anxiety about the university experience; helpfulness of student helpers in Week 1; the social events that were part of Fresher's week and induction.

Strategies and approaches highlighted by students to improve transition to university

- Make **induction compulsory** for all new students. This should include:
 - more course specific information on exactly what to expect during the first year and clarify what is expected of students in terms of academic experience
 - Students from 3rd and 4th year to talk to students about how the course progresses because Sometimes it is difficult for students to understand why some things were taught in the first year and only later in programme do they realise their importance
 - More information on using the Library and in particular electronic

shelving system

- Students Association to explain work of Student Association in helping to shape student experience e.g. roles of class reps and student parliament; encourage first years to become more involved in these activities
- More support for ICT Skills
- Emphasise availability of **mentoring scheme**- aim to give all first years a mentor. Mentors can help with more practical support e.g. in terms of how to use the library and on-line resources as well as in relation to academic and social aspects of being a student.
- Invite recent, **former graduates to speak to first years**; as well as employers was highlighted in order to emphasise **links between programme and employability** and future career early on: this would improve students engagement with programme from the beginning, when initially these links are not clear.
- **Matching process for students** sharing student accommodation should take place – i.e. same interests from student application forms- , to assist in process of forming friendships early on.
- For **college students entering directly to levels 2 and 3** of a programme, it would be useful to have the occasional ‘mixed classes of students from different years. ‘This enables students to get to know each other and encourages peer support, especially when you ‘know a face’. They can also help with ‘basic’ information such as ‘where is the canteen?’

Learning, teaching & assessment experience in first year

Many students highlighted the gap between expectations and experience in first year, in terms of programme curriculum, learning and teaching experience and level of challenge. The first year was regarded by many as basic and repetitive, insufficiently challenging and did not prepare students enough for the second year, which the nursing students in particular considered to be a ‘big step up academically’. Students with Advanced Highers found the repetitive nature of the first year a demotivating experience.

Many students who had been taught by PhD students found them to be inexperienced teachers, who lacked confidence, were inaccessible and badly organised. Students considered that first years should be taught by professional, experienced staff who can answer student’s queries and provide a better learning experience.

Many students considered that they had too few contact hours in first year, and would have liked to have had more coursework and learning and teaching activities to structure their time. In this respect some students felt that school had been more demanding than their first year at university. Many students perceived the first 8 weeks of first year as a period when there was no need to study, and too much free time, followed by an overload of assignments for week 12. The exception was Science-based programmes with greater contact hours and lab work requiring weekly reports. Some students considered that more pressure is required in years 1 and 2. ‘I enjoyed my course better in third year; there was more practical project work in small groups and more options available’.

Those students for whom their course did live up to their expectations considered that the pace was good and their programme was well – structured; they were busy with lots of contact hours; enjoyed doing first year presentations and the increased confidence this gave them; enjoyed group work– it made them work harder

and more consistently; enjoyed seminars which were interactive, discursive, and contextualised the theory from lectures; enjoyed placements/work experience and courses taught by practicing industry specialists.

Barriers to learning highlighted by the students included the difficulty of understanding new terminology and insufficient explanation by staff of concepts and ideas; there were inconsistencies regarding help and support available; the first year of the programme was not challenging enough and some teaching staff did not know enough about their subject area. Some students found lecture theatres and the amount of people present in the first year overwhelming; some students were not prepared for contributing to seminars; and others would have liked more flexibility regarding deadlines.

For most students, **interaction with staff** and other students was easy and straightforward. The nursing students were encouraged to email lecturers and other students with any issues or concerns and some forms of assessment encouraged integration within the class, even if cliques had been formed. Some members of staff were approached more often than others if they were perceived as being more supportive and interested. LSS students considered that the extent of interaction depended on individual personal teaching styles. Students were unsure of what action to take if they felt staff behaved inappropriately, e.g. if a lecturer spoke out of turn about a student or if a student was not given an appropriate amount of support or information. Concerns about who to turn to in these situations and the consequences of raising these issues were raised.

Students were asked to comment on **the way technology is used for learning** at GCU. Most students considered Blackboard to be only as useful as the lecturers made it. Some staff put good materials on, others did not. The varying opinions on Blackboard were dependant on the way in which it was used to support learning. Some students felt it may remove the incentive to attend lectures if the material is available on Blackboard. Blackboard is however a useful tool if students are unable to attend lectures and the fact that it can be accessed from home was viewed positively. Athens was viewed as a good resource. However some students found it difficult to access e-journals in the first year and would have liked more guidance and support. The ineffectiveness of the Saltire Centre as a library and quiet study space was highlighted by many students. The Saltire Centre is regarded as a good social space, but too noisy for focused learning and study. There was a general lack of knowledge of how to use it effectively for learning and reading.

The **timing of exams**, immediately following the Christmas period was viewed negatively by all students. All would prefer the exam period to take place before Christmas. None liked the idea of long thin modules, if this would concentrate all the exams at the end of the academic year. Some direct entry students found exams more difficult than they expected since this was very different from their college experience of assessment. **Assignment deadlines** were often close together causing problems with commitments outside of university. All would prefer smaller assignments throughout the semester rather than all at the end. Students considered that smaller coursework assignments should count towards the total mark for the module. Students also felt that there was a lack of information in first year regarding the marking system or how the classification system works. **Feedback** varied in quality and consistency, but even if it was good it was sometimes too late to inform the next assignment. Immediate feedback for oral assessments was highlighted by the nursing students as being useful.

Strategies and approaches highlighted by students to improve learning, teaching and assessment experience in first year

- **Greater contact time** in first year, and **greater support/guidance in how to use independent study time**- e.g. group projects/presentations that require students to meet and study outside lecture/seminar times and encourage informal peer support networks
- **More project work in first year** which is directly linked to **employer engagement** and provides a more challenging and motivating learning experience
- **Timetable structure**- group module teaching in blocks- rather than days with only a 1 hour lecture (often no incentive to attend particularly if all the lecture notes are on Blackboard)
- **More balanced timing of assignments**- first 8 weeks should be used more productively to engage students early on in the programme- earlier, smaller assessment tasks throughout the first semester. This would help students to pace themselves better and use their independent study time more productively.
- **Feedback**- huge variation in quality and quantity across programmes- constructive and detailed feedback very early on would be highly valuable in terms of understanding standards of learning expected and assessment processes
- **Support and guidance in use of Saltire Centre as library** and provision of at least one level with no computers to ensure quiet study space
- **Exams should take place before Christmas** (possibly commencing Semester A earlier in September). No support for long, thin first year- interpreted as 'doing nothing' for first semester and then undertaking all the exams at the end of the year. Students considered that they **needed the pressure of assignments and exams to make them study**- if summative assignments take place at the end of first year, rather than at the end of first semester, there would be no incentive to work hard. The issue that a long, thin structure would require students to undertake modules which they did not enjoy for the full year, rather than for one semester, was also highlighted as a problem by some. However all the students liked the idea of **more project-based, enquiry-led learning, engagement with employers/workplace, and formative assessment during the first year** which a long thin structure would facilitate.
- **Earlier explanation of the assessment system and regulations is required.** Students should have the option to **count their first year assignments** towards their degree classification. This would make the first year more meaningful and would motivate students to work well from the start.
- **Role/power of students to help shape learning and teaching experience**- need to explain roles of student reps and student parliament to first years.

Most positive aspects of first year for students	Most negative aspects of first year for students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small group learning, especially Problem Based Learning – forces people to study and get to know more people. • The Saltire Centre is a nice modern, fresh and bright environment to study and socialise. • Social life/ meeting people. • Breadth of academic programmes. • First year was laid back and easy going. • Lots of feedback from lecturers. • Independent learning, although challenging, was enjoyable • Good Sports facilities on Campus • Good quality of teaching – approachable and helpful academic staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group work can be a problem – ‘some workers and some slackers’. Staff are unsupportive of this and leave to students to resolve. • Adjusting to independent learning without staff guidance – more spoon feeding and guidance required. Struggled with new academic approach to work. Did not understand how to manage reading, reading lists long – expected more guidance • Repetition, lots of work is basic and repetitive of Higher grade work • Broad range of subjects, some not enjoyable • Too many exams and not enough coursework, especially for HN students who not familiar with exam experience • Timetables – travelling in for a one hour lecture • Noise levels in library, more a social space than a learning/study environment. • New PCs in the Saltire don’t take USB pens • Adapting to new living environment. I.e. noise levels in Halls – not enjoyable.

Conclusions

Students highlighted the need for better communication of the nature of programmes and the university experience at the pre-entry stage, to ensure more informed choice and better preparation; the developing of a 'sense of belonging' with the university and programme before arrival through pre-entry communication, activities and web-based support; timetabling which fits in more easily with commitments outside university such as work or childcare; greater contact time and learning and teaching activities which enable them to develop skills of independent learning; more balanced timing of assignments; a more challenging learning experience in first year through more project-based, collaborative and enquiry-led approaches; a more explicit link with employability early on; and greater, and more useful, feedback to support better student engagement; and a pre-Christmas exam model. The value of peer group support, such as mentoring schemes, in supporting academic and social transition has also been emphasised. Students expressed a preference for smaller, more frequent assessment tasks which enable them to pace themselves better, use their independent learning time more productively, and develop an earlier understanding of what is expected of them academically through feedback processes. Students considered that they should have the option to count their first year assignments towards their degree classification as this would make the first year more meaningful and would motivate students to work well from the start.

Despite the fact that GCU employs an extensive range of transition strategies and approaches at central and school levels which represent innovative and effective practice, the need to improve progression rates persist. In addressing this, the recognition and sharing of existing effective practice more widely across the university will be as important as developing or adapting new approaches to transition support. In considering the idea of changing the pace of the first year to enable the development of metacognitive skills, learning strategies and core and reflective skills within the context of subject discipline, GCU is now considering delivery models which enable greater formative assessment early on. The compacted delivery model associated with the completion of modules on a semester basis tends to lead to an emphasis on summative assessment and pressure on staff to 'deliver' subject content, rather than focus on skills and meta-cognitive development. Early formative assessment is an effective mechanism for clarifying expectations and an understanding of university level learning. (Whittaker 2008) The REAP project, has developed interesting approaches to formative assessment, based on good practice principles and centred on the development of the self-regulated learner. The university is currently exploring alternative delivery and assessment models to effect this change of pace and focus. Alternative models should enable greater formative assessment throughout the first semester and avoid the post-Christmas exam model which is the peak time for student withdrawal. Models should include a mid point summative assessment (before Christmas) to avoid end loading the first year, as well as a means of enabling students to transfer to different modules if they have made a wrong choice. The idea of 'class tickets' which would mean that students would not have to sit exams on the basis of high achievement in coursework is also being discussed.

Changes to existing approaches to transition support are likely to focus on strengthening the university's pre-entry role in terms of guidance and preparation, encouraging a more integrated approach to learning support at a central and School level and more explicitly recognising a 'first year pedagogy' in curriculum models and approaches to learning, teaching and assessment which support both the social and academic transition to the university experience.

Next Steps

Following discussion of the outcomes of Student Focus group event by members of the Project Partnership Working Group, it was agreed that it is necessary to establish the extent to which the issues and suggestions made by the students reflect the wider student body. It was agreed that a summary of the outcomes of recent student consultations undertaken by CRLL, Learner Support and Schools will be provided to the Moving Forward team. A summary of issues that have been discussed within staff – student consultation meetings and recorded in the minutes will also be drawn together by and provided to the Moving Forward team. The three main areas for which information on the student experience and student views will be gathered are:

- Pre-entry information, guidance and preparation
- Transition to university
- Learning, Teaching and Assessment experience in the first year

The student experience will also be discussed at the Student Association Class Rep Conference in 15 April. Issues raised at this conference which are relevant to transition and progression will be fed into the Moving Forward project. The information and data provided by staff to the Moving Forward team will be analysed and summarised and will inform the Moving Forward event on 20 May. The purpose of this event is to agree the proposed GCU Transition and Progression Framework which will be developed as a result of the staff and student consultation process and to discuss and agree project streams which will support its implementation across the university.

Appendix

Moving Forward Student Focus Group Data Analysis – Participant Details

1. What age are you?
 - a. 17-18 1%
 - b. 19-20 23%
 - c. 21-22 33%
 - d. 23-29 33%
 - e. 30 or over 11%

2. What sex are you?
 - a. Male 39%
 - b. Female 56%
 - c. No response 5%

3. In which school do you study?
 - a. BNE 6%
 - b. CBS 11%
 - c. SEC 0%
 - d. HSC 0%
 - e. LSS 39%
 - f. LS 6%
 - g. NMCH 39%

4. Which programmes are you enrolled?
 - a. Mainly BA Social Science and BA Nursing Studies

5. Which year of your programme are you in at the moment?
 - a. 1 0%
 - b. 2 6%
 - c. 3 45%
 - d. 4 33%
 - e. Other 1 final year student 6%
 - f. Other 2 student sabbatical officers

6. Which year did you enter your course?
 - a. 1 89%
 - b. 2 5.5%
 - c. 3 0%
 - d. 4 0%
 - e. Other PG study 5.5%

7. Has anyone in your family attended University before?
 - a. Parents 33%
 - b. Siblings 61%
 - c. Aunt/Uncles 11%
 - d. Grandparents 0%
 - e. Other 5.5%

8. What was your highest qualification on reaching GCU?

- | | |
|------------|-----|
| a. Highers | 55% |
| b. HNC | 17% |
| c. HND | 0% |
| d. Other | 28% |

9. Did you come to GCU from?

- | | |
|-------------------|------|
| a. School | 55% |
| b. College | 17% |
| c. Other HEI | 5.5% |
| d. Been Out of ED | 17% |
| e. Other (Gap yr) | 5.5% |

10. Was the course you are studying at GCU your first choice of course?

- | | |
|--------|-----|
| a. Yes | 95% |
| b. No | 5% |

Appendix 2

Moving Forward – Focus Group Questions

Background Information (15 mins max)

The first set of questions asks a little about your **educational background** and what brought you to GCU....

1. Can you tell me a bit about why you chose to study at GCU?
2. Was GCU your first choice?
3. If yes why was GCU your first choice?
4. If GCU was not your first choice, can you tell me some of the reasons why it wasn't?
5. Did you have any links with GCU before starting your course? (E.g campus visits, visits from GCU staff).
6. If yes, did you find it useful? Can you explain a little about what you found most useful and if there is anything else you would have liked to have been included?
7. If you did not have any links with GCU is it something you were offered or were aware of? Can you think of any ways in which you would have found having a link with GCU before starting your course useful?
8. How could advice and guidance before you start at GCU be improved?

Transition Experience (30 mins max)

The second set of questions explores your **experience of your first Year at University**

1. In what ways would you say you were prepared for the transition to University?
2. In what ways would you say you were unprepared for the transition to University?
3. When you reached GCU did you receive any help in getting to know about the university and how it worked? If so from where?
(Prompt: other students, academic staff, support staff (ELS, wellbeing etc))
4. Did you make use of a student mentor?
5. If yes, did you find this helpful?

6. **If no did you know they were available?**
7. **Were there any areas where you would have liked help and either didn't know how to access it or found it wasn't available?**
8. **Did you attend any induction sessions, either for the university as a whole or within your school?**
9. **If so did you find these useful?**
10. **How could induction be improved?**
11. **If you came from a college (E.g. entered at Level 2 or above) can you explain how easy you found it to mix with students who were already on your course?**
12. **Is there anything you can think of which could be done for students who come directly from colleges to help them mix with students already on the course?**
13. **Can you explain one thing you have found best in your first Year of University?**
14. **And also about one thing you have found worst in your first Year**

Learning and Teaching experience (50 mins max)

These questions are focussed on your **experience of learning & teaching in the first year**

1. **Did your course live up to your expectations? If yes, in what ways, if no, why?**
2. **To what extent did you feel the knowledge and skills you brought with you to GCU were valued and built on within your course in your first year? Eg Did you feel deskilled or lack confidence as a learner during your first semester?**
3. **Were there any particular barriers to your learning and understanding of your subject? E.g. making connections between different concepts or across different subject areas; lack of confidence; lack of motivation etc?**
4. **To what extent did your experience of learning & teaching in first year encourage you to interact with the teaching staff and your fellow students early on?**
(E.g. opportunities to discuss and clarify mutual expectations of university level learning; formative assessment & feedback; group work, project work etc)

5. **What do you think about the way technology is used for learning at GCU?** (E.g. online information, course materials on Blackboard, email, communication with lecturers etc) How has this affected your experience?
6. **What one aspect of your course, and the way you were taught, did you particularly enjoy?**
7. **What one aspect of your course, and the way you were taught, did you find unsatisfactory?**
8. **To what extent did you find your experience of learning in the first year stimulating and challenging?**
Did not/to some extent/to great extent
9. **To what extent did your programme enable you to manage your other commitments outside university** e.g. family/work etc?
Did not/to some extent/to great extent
10. **Do you feel that assignments and assessment were appropriately spaced?**
11. **How did you feel about feedback you got on your assignments? Did it arrive quickly and did you find it useful?**
12. **How did you find the exam process? Did you feel they fairly reflected the content of your programme?**
13. **Have you ever considered dropping out? And if so what were the reasons? What prevented you from doing so?**
(Peak time of withdrawal is after Christmas – what do students think is reason for this?)
14. **In what ways could the first year be changed to improve the student experience, support the transition process better and make progression to the next stage easier?**
(eg *delivery model; types of learning and teaching activities; types of support*)

Link to Activity: student journey mapping.

Use flipcharts and draw line/spiral which begins at pre-entry and ends at end of first year. Ask students to use post it notes to highlight critical points on that journey and to think about what would improve the experience (eg thinking about support as well as learning& teaching processes)

Finally ask students to mention anything else they think might be relevant or useful in describing their first year experience at GCU and how this could be improved.