

Examining student success in the transition to university: Findings from a systematic review

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Key digested message

This article presents a systematic review of student success during the transition to university, reframing it as a multidimensional, person-centred process. It integrates academic, psychosocial and wellbeing domains, proposing a tripartite definition of success. The consolidation of factors into five domains offers conceptual clarity for practitioners. Key insights include the modifiability of protective factors, the need for updated measurement tools and the importance of pre-arrival support. The review calls for holistic, proactive interventions and broader success metrics, with implications for universities, feeder institutions and policymakers aiming to help students thrive, not just persist.

Keywords

Transition, University, Success, Higher Education, Systematic Review

Introduction

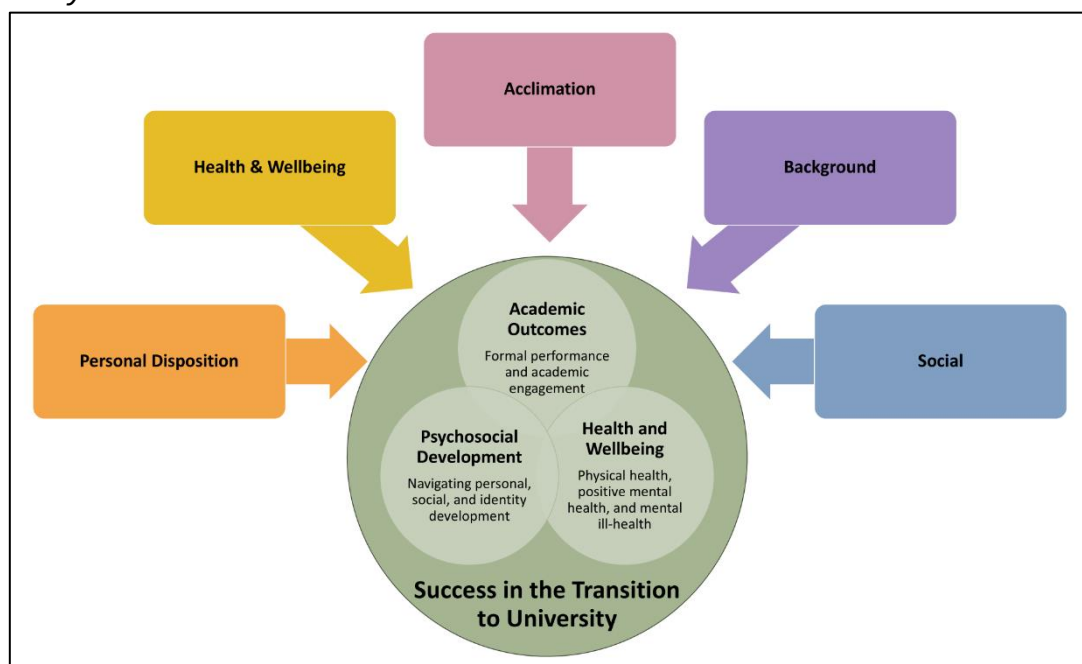
The transition to higher education is an individual, non-linear, evolving process that new students need to navigate. Despite it being an opportunity for growth, it can also be a time of great challenge as students traverse changes to their education, social, and psychological contexts. Success in this transition has been of interest to higher education institutions and the practitioners within them for some time, often from a perspective of minimising dropout and maximising student continuation. Though of value, this perspective misses the interests of the key stakeholders in this process – the students themselves.

This article brings together three strands of systematic review work to offer a comprehensive and accessible understanding of students' transition to university from a person-centred perspective. The review looked to investigate the person-level risk and protective factors that influence success in the transition whilst also exploring the operationalisations of said success. The findings reveal that success in

this context should not be considered a singular outcome, but a multidimensional process shaped by a constellation of factors.

The first strand of the review looked at identifying the risk and protective factors when success is operationalised as academic achievement. This identified 77 factors, with prior academic performance, academic self-efficacy and conscientiousness emerging as consistent protective factors (Ball et al., 2024). The second strand of the review focused on the factors influencing psychosocial operationalisations of success and consolidated 96 factors into five domains (Personal disposition, Health and wellbeing, Acclimation, Background, and Social) forming the PHABS-PSS (Personal disposition, Health and wellbeing, Acclimation, Background, and Social factors influencing PsychoSocial Success) framework (Ball et al., 2025a). The final strand turned its focus to reviewing the operationalisations of success and concludes by proposing a tripartite definition of success encompassing academic performance and engagement, psychosocial development, and health and wellbeing (Ball et al., 2025b). Figure 1 outlines a summary of the domains that influence success and the factors that comprise a holistic definition of success in the transition to university. Together, these findings provide a robust foundation for understanding the transition to university as a dynamic and person-centred process.

Figure 1. Factor domains that comprise and influence success in the transition to university



Summary findings

Each strand of the review presents interesting findings, however, bringing the strands together generates several key insights that were previously obscured by the fragmented nature of the literature. These insights are particularly relevant for practitioners working to support students during the transition to university.

1. Success is multidimensional

The review challenges the dominance of academic achievement and retention as sole indicators of success. Instead, it presents a clear, evidence-based framework that integrates academic, psychosocial and wellbeing domains. This reframing encourages practitioners to consider a broader range of student outcomes, including emotional wellbeing, social engagement and integration, and personal development. Importantly, from a person-centred standpoint, the students' perspective of what they consider to be success in this transition should be prioritised above institution valued metrics.

2. Protective factors are modifiable

Many of the most impactful predictors of success, such as emotional regulation, help-seeking attitudes, and social support, can be developed through targeted interventions. This shifts the focus from identifying risk to enabling resilience. Practitioners can play a key role in fostering these protective traits through structured support programmes, mentoring, and skill-building workshops. Taking this strengths-based approach encourages a more positive engagement with the transition and avoids positioning students as being in a state of deficit as they start this journey.

3. Conceptual clarity enables action

By consolidating overlapping constructs into coherent domains (e.g., the PHABS-PSS, Ball et al., 2025a), the review provides a more navigable and parsimonious evidence base. This clarity allows practitioners to more easily identify which areas to target in their work and to communicate findings and strategies across teams and institutions. This clarity also allows for the identification of work that is operating in too narrow a field of view.

4. Measurement practices need updating

The review highlights the limitations of current measurement tools, for example many are outdated or narrowly focused. There is also a need to assess the cross-cultural difference between educational settings and the underlying assumptions within measures. For example, the widely used Student Adjustment to College Questionnaire (Baker & Siryk, 1984) was first created in 1984 and formulated in an American college context. There is a clear need for integrated, multidimensional tools that reflect the complexity of the student experience. Practitioners involved in evaluation and monitoring should advocate for and contribute to the development of such tools. Particularly for quantitative research, there is a clear need for valid and reliable measures that can allow the assessment of the multidimensional success in the transition to university.

5. Timing of support is critical

The importance of the preparatory phase prior to university entry is now evident. Interventions that begin before students arrive on campus are likely to be more effective than reactionary support. This insight supports a shift toward proactive, pre-arrival programming. This also encourages collaboration between higher education institutions and their feeder institutions for joined up thinking in regard to preparatory work with students who are transitioning from one institution to another.

Implications for practice and policy

The findings of this review have direct implications for universities, policymakers, and student support services. Below are practical recommendations for each stakeholder group.

For universities

Universities should look to embed holistic transition support into induction programmes, including resources that target emotional regulation, help-seeking and social integration. Alongside this they should look to develop pre-arrival materials that help students prepare mentally and emotionally for university life. These could include self-assessment tools, video guides and peer-led webinars. Given the value of social support, implementing peer mentoring schemes that connect incoming students with experienced peers would aid in fostering belonging and reduce anxiety. In addition, both academic and support staff should be trained to recognise

and respond to psychosocial challenges as well as the more traditional academic ones.

For feeder institutions

Feeder institutions should collaborate with universities to identify students who may be at risk during the transition and provide tailored support before they leave school or college. With this collaboration, the introduction of transition-readiness programmes that look to build skills that support the navigation of this transition would be beneficial. Focusing on self-regulation, resilience and help-seeking could prove helpful to set students up to be able to navigate the need to be more independent.

For policymakers

Policymakers should embrace and encourage the broadening of success metrics beyond the focus on retention and academic achievement to include wellbeing, psychosocial development and student engagement. There should also be a move to fund longitudinal research and intervention trials that explore the full transition period, including pre-arrival and post-settlement phases. Further to this, support must be given to inclusive practices that look to address the needs of underrepresented groups including non-traditional entrants, international students and those in minority groups.

Limitations and remaining questions

While this review has made significant strides in consolidating the literature, there are still several limitations within the evidence base. The majority of the studies identified in the review are drawn from Western, single-institution samples which limits the generalisability of the findings. Furthermore, many of the constructs are under-theorised or inconsistently measured. This necessitates further conceptual refinement to ensure the reliability of the findings. Compounding this, there is a lack of longitudinal research that spans the full transition period. It is vital that research considers pre-arrival, induction and post-settlement phases. There also remains the question of how we can reconcile this valuable person-centred approach with that of the institution and national level which remains focused on metrics such as retention as sole markers of success.

Future research directions

To build on the foundations laid by this review, future research should develop and validate integrated tools for measuring transition success across academic, psychosocial and wellbeing domains. This should then look to be included in longitudinal studies that begin prior to university entry and track students through their first year. Looking to interventions, work should explore the effectiveness of pre-arrival interventions that leverage a strengths-based approach and peer mentoring schemes in enhancing transition outcomes. Further work should also look to investigate the experiences of underrepresented and minority groups, for example non-traditional entry students and those with diverse gender identities.

Conclusion

The transition to university is a pivotal moment in a student's educational journey. By reframing success as a multidimensional, person-centred process, this review offers a new lens through which to understand and support students. The challenge now is to translate these insights into practice by designing interventions that are timely, inclusive, and grounded in evidence. In doing so, we can ensure that more students not only survive the transition to university but thrive within it.

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