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As easy as 1-2-3? Reflections on a programme redesign: Implementing the 1-2-3 delivery model

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Transition has long been a key concern for higher education institutions. This paper reflects on the redesign of a Liberal Arts Foundation Year to explore better ways of considering transition as an ongoing and complex process rather than as a specific moment at the start of the academic year. In particular, the implementation of a 1-2-3 programme structure allowed the programme to more fully address the nuances of transition and student support across the academic year. This structure facilitated a more gradual adjustment to university study, with a single 'short fat' module at the point of entry followed by two mid-length modules taken concurrently for the remaining two-thirds of Semester 1. Students then follow the typical undergraduate structure of three concurrent, semester-long, modules in Semester 2. This redesign prompted a reconsideration of the Foundation Year's position as part of wider institutional structures, and contributed to improved student satisfaction with modules and improved academic results across the cohort.

Introduction

The transition into university has been a longstanding subject of scholarly inquiry. Palmer et al. (2009, p.37), for instance, emphasise 'a demand for research into the first-year transition process' and highlight the range of aspects considered by studies in relation to this topic. Since 2009, increasing pressures on students, such as the introduction of higher tuition fees and the recent cost of living crisis, have intensified focus on the perception of the value for money of a degree. These contexts have also led to a greater number of students balancing their time between their academic studies and paid employment; the 2024 'Student Academic Experience Survey' from Advance HE and the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) indicates that 56% of students now work while studying (Neves et al., 2024). Alongside this, Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO)'s most recent report notes that 16% of students now report that they have experienced mental health issues (Sanders, 2023, p.10). Within this broader evolving national context, foundation years are faced with an

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additional and distinct set of considerations and contexts for transition. In particular, Chivers (2019) has addressed the complexities unique to foundation year students and programmes, which are often further compounded by the interdisciplinary nature of some programmes and the complexities of provision with a widening participation focus (see, for example, Warren, 2002; Park and Son, 2010; Enstone and Newman, 2015; Breeze et al., 2018). Despite this, the role of transition is a fundamental aspect of foundation year design, given its role as an introductory phase of a degree programme, and the integration of key approaches and ideas often means that foundation years lead the way in innovation and change in this area. Much excellent work has been done in addressing the complexities and intersectional challenges associated with the transition to university through focused research on various aspects of student support.

This reflective case study proposes that, in addition to the many existing strategies and excellent practice, a reconsideration of programme structure and its potential for reframing the transition into and through the foundation year can play a crucial role in its effectiveness. This case study examines the redesign of an interdisciplinary foundation year programme to more effectively encompass the concept of transition as a multifaceted process that extends beyond the initial shift to higher education. The redesign aimed not only to address the intersecting issues identified as critical to student transition but also to consider the foundation year's role within broader institutional processes and support structures.

While the existing programme structure offered some distinct benefits, it was not ideal for the nature of the provision and the programme's role in supporting various aspects of the transitional process. The redesign resulted in the implementation of a new programme structure, utilising a 1-2-3 delivery model, and allowed for the reconfiguration and redesign of modules within this new structure to enhance both academic and non-academic support throughout the year. The 1-2-3 model includes an initial single 'short fat' module – i.e. a compressed module delivered across a short period – followed by two slightly compressed modules delivered simultaneously for the remainder of the first semester, and three modules delivered simultaneously across the second semester. This delivery model and the wider redesign of the programme led to a range of positive consequences: student satisfaction and module feedback improved; there was more coherence between the foundation year and the wider structures and approaches of the university, and it retained many of the positive aspects of the previous iteration in supporting students whilst also looking more broadly at the transitional process as a longer-term and interconnected set of aspects and issues.

Transition and the Foundation Year

Several theoretical considerations of transition emphasise its significance and multifaceted nature. Cage et al. (2021, p.1076) highlight that 'transitions start before entering university, and include navigating changes between years, and then leaving and entering the world of work or postgraduate study', reflecting a model of transition that encompasses critical moments throughout the student experience. Kift's (2015, p.51) reflections on her iconic 'Transition Pedagogy' underscore the ongoing need for a

focus on this key area for first years, noting that there is a cost to 'early student departure – for institutions, individuals, professions and societies across a spectrum of reputational, ethical, personal, economic and legal implications', and that this is especially significant in the first year of university. Kift (p.53) further emphasises the different aspects of transition, noting that it is a 'very individual' process 'academically and socially, but also culturally, administratively and environmentally.' This consideration of transition and its wider significance for different groups is reflected in studies that explore more specific contexts.

In the context of foundation year transitions and some of the specific areas of focus for foundation year students, Shepperd et al. (2023) draw attention to wellbeing, building on broader discussions, for example by Richardson et al. (2012), regarding the distinction between 'thriving' and 'surviving' during university transition. Cage et al. (2021) also distinguish between staff and student perspectives in their study, which focuses on mental health during transition, flagging the need to consider diverse perspectives in addressing the complexities. Amidst this range of explorations of vital and intersecting issues relating to transition, Gale and Parker's (2012) exploration of the concept is particularly useful in challenging the ways that transition is conceived. They argue that transition has been broadly considered in three ways, 'as induction, development, and becoming', but that these categories 'are not rigid and inflexible, but relatively permeable and fluid' (p.735).

In addition to the complexity surrounding definitions, scope, and individual experiences, foundation years often involve considerations and pressures in addition to those encountered in a traditional first year of university study. For students more broadly, Thompson, Pawson and Evans (2021) have formulated the acronym SAILL, which stands for Struggles Around Independent Learning and Living, to summarise some of the concerns over the move to university study. Foundation year students are, however, often also navigating a double transition (into and out of the foundation year) and foundation year cohorts generally include a higher proportion of students who have been identified as potentially less confident about their university studies, such as those from widening participation backgrounds or mature students (Dart, 2006; Donaldson, 2000). These transitions therefore have a greater significance and impact. Although these programmes are frequently designed with a focus on widening participation and providing a high level of support (see Leech et al., 2016), which is central to their establishment and design, the transition process can be more complicated. A wider theoretical positioning of transition means that the entire foundation year curriculum needs to be carefully crafted with academic transition in mind.

Programme structure reconsidered

In order to better address transition on the Liberal Arts Foundation Year, with the range of complexities identified above, the programme was redesigned to follow a new structure. This programme includes a range of potential progression routes, predominantly into humanities disciplines, but also some routes into the social sciences and languages. The Foundation Year is integrated into an academic school, but

with dedicated Foundation Year staff as well as some input from academics from each of the progression routes. The initial curriculum consisted of six core modules, which had to be interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary to engage students with a wide range of potential academic interests. Students were predominantly from widening participation backgrounds, including a significantly higher proportion of mature and disabled students compared to the general University population. Specifically, over the first four cohorts (2017 onwards), the Foundation Year included an average of 30%-40% of students who had declared a disability, compared to 20%-25% in the broader university cohort and 15% nationally. Additionally, the programme included a substantial proportion of students from the most disadvantaged groups according to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, with an average of 40%-45% from the first and second (i.e. most deprived) quintiles, and similarly high percentages according to POLAR4 measures, with 40-50% from quartiles 1 and 2 (i.e. lowest participation).

As part of the initial design of the Foundation Year, the programme had been set up across three ten-week terms, with modules delivered sequentially in a five-week block (see Figure 1). This experimental delivery model offered several advantages: students could focus on a single set of content and deadlines at any given time and were given a much longer period across the year within which to complete assessed work, seek support and make the most of settling into university.

Term 1		Term 2		Term 3	
Module 1	Module 2	Module 3	Module 4	Module 5	Module 6

Figure 1

However, there were also several disadvantages to this model. Since the delivery was part of a trial for the University, it did not align with the standard academic structure, which consists of two twelve-week semesters, with a more traditional delivery of three concurrent modules (see Figure 2). As a result, the Foundation Year was not synchronised with the rest of the University in terms of assessment periods, delivery weeks for teaching and academic expectations. Consequently, the experience of the Foundation Year students differed substantially from that of other students who were in their first year at the University.

Semester 1	Semester 2
Module 1	Module 4
Module 2	Module 5
Module 3	Module 6

Figure 2

At the start of the year, this difference often worked well, as Foundation Year students appreciated the additional time to complete assignments and the focused nature of the content while they navigated new systems, spaces, and social relationships.

However, the final term presented challenges, as it was predominantly delivered after teaching for the rest of the institution had finished and extended into the summer in the build-up to the submission of the final assessments. This timing disrupted the social connections students had established with the broader student body, as most other students had left for the summer. Additionally, the extended teaching period of 31 weeks compared to the 25 weeks of other students (not including the assessment periods) posed difficulties for students who needed more substantial paid employment or time to rest and recuperate over the summer. For students who were more likely to have found the transition to university challenging and who were statistically more likely to have some resit assessments, this reduction in the summer break before their first year of undergraduate studies was particularly problematic.

In terms of the consideration of transition as an ongoing set of processes, this also made the move onwards at the end of the Foundation Year more problematic, as students were required to readjust to the more traditional delivery model upon entering the first year of their degree programmes. The anticipation of this significant change increased anxieties about levels of preparedness and the need for adjustment, thereby undermining some of the benefits of the Foundation Year as a bridging experience.

Programme structure redesigned

A redesign of the delivery model for the Foundation Year was essential to better prepare students for their transitional experiences both into and out of the Foundation Year, and also to enable the full year to function as a transitional experience. A comprehensive restructuring of the Foundation Year allowed for the retention of the elements that had proven beneficial in the trial of the previous model, but also enabled further integration of the Foundation Year into the institution in a way that responded to the specific academic and support needs of the students. As a central consideration of this redesign, the engagement with transition as a multifaceted process was key; the new structure needed to consider a much wider range of impacts and contexts, viewing the entire year as a transitional experience with key moments of potential stress.

The resulting redesign introduced the 1-2-3 delivery model. This model includes a ‘short fat’ module for the first third of Semester 1, followed by two mid-length modules taken concurrently for the remaining two-thirds of the semester. Semester 2 consisted of three full-length modules taken simultaneously, aligning with the structure used for subsequent years of study at the university (see figure 3).

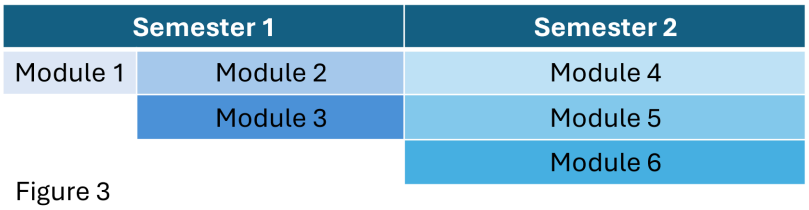

Figure 3

There were several benefits of this redevelopment. It allowed the retention of one of the key benefits from the original programme structure's short module delivery. In keeping a short module as the first element of study in the initial weeks at university, the new model kept a simplicity of focus. This initial module was explicitly branded as a bridging module, aimed at facilitating students' move into higher education. Other universities have experimented with similar transitional modules. For example, Knox (2005) describes a carefully designed provision that introduces academic skills and approaches and was delivered during the summer before university entry. However, Knox's module was generic, focusing on broad preparation and skills, rather than being tailored to specific programme design or content. This approach has since been adopted by several institutions, including York St John University, which have employed blended learning to create introductory bridging materials and methods to support students more generally in the move to higher education. However, the provision of these pre-arrival resources assumes that students have time and capacity to engage with them before registering for their new programme, and therefore cannot supersede the need for robust support and effective design within the programme itself.

Step 1

With this range of transitional concerns in mind, the initial module of the Foundation Year was redesigned to incorporate interdisciplinary approaches to the city of York as well as introduce the nature of university-level studies and essential assessment and academic skills. This was intended to help establish the interdisciplinary provision of the programme, address key considerations related to students' subject interests, and engage practically with assessment processes. A substantial skills development thread was integrated into this module and subsequent ones (see Enstone, 2021; Enstone, 2025), alongside an exploration of the implications of interdisciplinarity for both current and future studies.

This 'short fat' module allows students to focus on a single set of content and assessments during the challenging period when they are adapting to university-level study and their new environment, systems and people. It also provides scope for team building, and familiarisation with the University and the city as part of the module, as well as a highly structured approach to the initial assignments. The introductory nature of this module and the particular type of support it offers were highlighted to students as part of three clear, and different, steps for them within the programme structure, with an expectation of increasing autonomy over the course of the year. For example, in relation to assessment support, this first module was comprehensively scaffolded and supported. The summative assessment was structured around case study packs, which were provided to students and included carefully selected materials for each subject discipline, featuring primary source samples and designated secondary readings. Students were also given essay planning template documents to help them establish good practice in essay and critical paragraph structures. Students were required to submit a formative essay plan and a writing sample to receive feedback prior to completing their final assessment. Each of these aspects was reinforced

through in-class sessions covering various aspects of essay writing, including editing, planning, and time management.

Step 2

For the second step of the 1-2-3 model, support was modified to encourage greater student autonomy in their study approaches, building upon the feedback and skills developed through the completion of a full module earlier in the semester. In these two mid-length modules, students were expected to select and research their own topics for assessments and to work more independently towards their completion. However, despite this increased autonomy, there were still substantial integrated skills development components. For instance, 'Writing Labs', which were branded as 'time to experiment' were introduced as a key feature. These classes provided an opportunity for students to explore and choose their own strategies for effectively completing their assessments. These sessions were timetabled and staffed, focusing initially on introducing specific methodologies or approaches, followed by time for students to apply these techniques in their own practice. For example, one session focused on time boxing as an approach for managing the writing process, and students had an opportunity to try this out in class. Another session concentrated on editing techniques, and again students were given the chance to apply these methods to their own work. Students were also encouraged to apply the approaches and strategies covered in the first step of the model.

Step 3

The third step of the 1-2-3 model was designed to more closely resemble the academic structure and environment that students would encounter beyond the Foundation Year. Again, this provided students with a greater opportunity to practice autonomy and independence in their approaches to study. In addition to revisiting many of the skills from the first two steps, students needed to apply these skills to more diverse assessment types and had even more autonomy in selecting their assessment topics and approaches. Studying three modules concurrently was also beneficial for students to develop their approach to their studies. A key benefit of this step was the opportunity for students to integrate knowledge across modules, fostering a more comprehensive and nuanced engagement with the content and facilitating their overall development. For example, insights gained from a discussion on civil rights in the 'Freedom and Justice' module could inform analyses of Afrofuturism in the 'Imagining the Future' module. This integration enabled students to appreciate the interdisciplinary nature of their studies and encouraged them to view the programme more holistically, considering it as a cohesive developmental experience.

The redesign of the Foundation Year structure provided an opportunity to re-evaluate the modules and introduce an 'Independent Project' module in the second semester. This was made feasible by the new delivery pattern of the module across the 12-week semester, which replaced the previous shorter 5-week delivery periods. The extended timeframe allowed students to thoroughly explore their project options and have enough time to fully develop and realise the project as well as to be able to receive ongoing feedback from their supervisor. This approach was central to conceptualising

transition as a nuanced, year-long process. The revised structure aimed to make the most of the opportunities afforded by the stepped approach and facilitate a smoother shift to subsequent years of their degree programmes. The 'Independent Project' module enabled students to select topics aligned with their disciplinary interests and build upon the skills developed in the earlier phases of the 1-2-3 model.

The main project resembled a short dissertation but incorporated a more structured approach and a higher level of support appropriate to the students' level. The module also featured a Poster Display, which successfully introduced a discursive and interactive element. This component fed into summative reflective practice at key stages of the module and was submitted as part of a portfolio assessment. The integration of these elements was intended to enhance students' confidence across various aspects of academic practice and content. Students were also encouraged to discuss their ideas with staff from their intended progression subject areas, fostering the idea that they should be considering the move beyond their foundation year studies. This approach was instrumental in supporting the year-long integrated approach to transition within the new structure, contributing significantly to the overall integration of the Foundation Year into the students' wider experience of their programmes and the university.

University integration

While much of the focus of the redesign was on the practical benefits within each module, the restructuring ultimately aimed to reconceptualise the Foundation Year as a series of interconnected and progressive stages addressing key issues identified above in relation to transition as an ongoing process. Part of this included consideration of the traditional pressures of transition into university as well as concerns specific to foundation year provision over the progression to the first year. As a result, a more holistic consideration of the positioning of the Foundation Year was required within wider University structures and key elements of transition, such as support, social aspects, and mental health considerations.

The restructuring of the programme meant that the delivery of teaching was aligned with the academic calendar and delivery patterns of other undergraduates at York St John University. This alignment brought significant advantages, including the synchronisation of assessment deadlines and module completion with the wider institution, so students were able to familiarise themselves with the flow of the academic year. The alignment with university-wide schedules also provided students with a longer summer break, which offered additional time for resits, the opportunity for further work, managing other commitments, or time away from their studies.

The previous model had also caused issues with students' social integration into the University as Foundation Year students were often isolated during their final term when other students had completed their studies and left for the summer. This isolation fostered a sense of being 'othered,' creating a perception that the Foundation Year was markedly different from the rest of the degree programme and not part of an integrated academic experience. These social rather than academic concerns were integral to the redesign of the Foundation Year as part of the wider consideration of

transition established by Kift (2015) and Gale and Parker (2012). Cage et al.'s (2021) work on the differentiation of staff and student perspectives on the focus and delivery of what would work best for transitional processes, support and structures was also essential here; the rationale for the need for the redesign was academic in delivery, but also motivated by student experience and feedback on the original model.

Impacts and outcomes

It is evident that the redesign of the Foundation Year programme has had a positive effect. These changes led to improved student feedback both on individual modules and the overall programme, with module satisfaction scores improving by an average of 0.7 (modules scored out of 5). Notably, the introduction of the 'Independent Project' module was particularly well-received. Student comments highlighted its effectiveness, with feedback such as, 'Brilliant module especially as we can tailor it to exactly what we want'; 'Favourite module of the year, focused on my progression subject and used the skills learnt during the year to write a piece I was engaged with and proud of.' Other comments similarly highlighted the value that students placed on the content and skills developed in this module.

While specific module feedback does not directly reflect on the programme's structure, it was evident that students felt more confident in their skills by the third step of the 1-2-3 model and demonstrated increased engagement with their studies. Additionally, there was a noticeable improvement in the overall tone of student reflections on the Foundation Year; whereas previous feedback had sometimes focused on concerns over the final weeks, feedback became more positive in general. This included comments noting that the Foundation Year was 'an excellent opportunity' and praising the 'high level of support throughout an incredibly interesting and engaging year of study.'

At this point, the Foundation Year modules were marked as Pass/Fail, so there was not much possibility of tracking shifts in grades within the programmes, but it was evident that student outcomes beyond the Foundation Year were much improved. In the first year following the implementation of the redesigned Foundation Year, 94.3% of the cohort achieved either a First or a Second Class classification in their first year of undergraduate study, up from 73.3% in the previous year. Notably, 7.6% of students attained a First, whereas no students from the prior cohort had achieved this grade. Although it is not possible to infer too much from this correlation between improved results and the programme redesign, the combination of these aspects with the positive response to the modules suggests that the redesign met many of its original aims and seemed to improve the experience and transition for these students.

The future

Initial impacts of the redesign on student feedback and outcomes have been positive, with anecdotal feedback from academic staff noting the benefits of the new structure across a number of areas within and beyond the programme. To continue to assess the impact of this redesign, it would be useful to track the longer-term impacts on aspects such as progression and retention. The University is currently gathering data on graduate outcomes and attrition, which could be considered for this purpose, and

there is also an ongoing project within the School of Humanities to explore former Foundation Year students' reflections on the programme. Both of these projects should yield ongoing information about the effects of this redevelopment.

For the future of the programme, beyond this initial redesign, the 1-2-3 structure has facilitated the ongoing development of the Foundation Year. It has allowed for modification of each module within the context of the Foundation Year itself as well as in relation to the wider University context. Central to this ongoing development is an engagement with the notion of transition and the need to consider this in its very widest sense.

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