

Lesson 1

Excited or daunted – how are you feeling about university?

This lesson helps to raise pupils' awareness about their current understanding / expectations / worries of university, and the selected podcast excerpts are informative and reassuring (i.e. they should allay many concerns that learners might have). In this lesson, we hear from pupils and teachers about common attitudes / beliefs that young people have about university, as well as from university students and staff.

Warm-up question

Teachers can pose the following question to pupils to open up the lesson:

How are you feeling about your ideas for what you'll do, after secondary school? Do your plans include university?

Main task 1: interviewing peers

Pupils interview each other about their plans for post-secondary (with some emphasis being placed on university, and what they think it'll be like).

Suggested interview questions that pupils can add to / adapt etc:

- Can you tell me about your thoughts about going on to university, once you've finished school?
- What is it that interests you about the possibility of going to university? What are you excited about / looking forward to?
- Have you had any opportunities to learn what being at university is like (e.g. experiences of friends / family; visits to a university campus; information offered at school)?
- Is there anything you're unsure about in terms of going to university, or anything that's worrying you about it?
- How do you think studying at university will be different to the studying you're currently doing at school? Can you give examples?
- In your view, is there anything more that could be done to support young people like yourselves in moving from secondary school to university?
- What sense do you get from peers about their hopes, and their worries, about next steps after secondary school (be that university, or other options)?
- Is there anything else that you'd like to share on this topic?

Once pupils have had a chance to ask and answer, and take notes on main ideas, they share with the whole class.

Main task 2: hearing what other young people in Scotland had to say

Summary of Main task 2

Pupils now listen to some short excerpts from the pupils' podcast, about their thoughts / concerns, and compare and contrast their own interview responses with the main themes that came out in the pupils' podcast interview. What are the main areas of similarity / difference?

Relevant podcast excerpts

Nasreen, S6 pupil, talks about her concerns around workload and note-taking (01:00)

So I think it's just I feel quite overwhelmed and this is only two advanced highers and now when it's like over the summer as much as I would be like excited to make out my outfits for like uni I'm gonna be also thinking about oh first lecture is it important do I have to go do I have to listen intently do I have to write down everything like, how do you make notes of someone like talking at you? I always struggle making notes just by my teacher putting down like you put something on the board and he's like "summarize it", like oh god okay just quickly take a picture and then save it for later. If I can't even make good notes from some- from a board how am I gonna follow along in classes where I'm just being spoken to? and that's it and it's like okay they've said everything, go and do something I just... That is how university works, but I feel like we should get like a preparation class to be told, okay, so this is how it's gonna work. This is how you go about it. But we don't.

Blossom, S6 pupil, reflects on some relevant mental health issues in her first excerpt, and decision-making about subject choices in her second (01:28; 00:59)

Yeah, I think, like touching more on Nasreen's point about the whole like ethnic family type of thing, I feel like with a lot of people that come from ethnic families, it's that anxiety of like, oh, I have to make my family proud, you know, they've came to this country, so now I have to like, do what I can to, you know, give back to them. They've like given their whole lives away to support me and all that. and that anxiety, like when you actually like start going into university and all that, it's that whole idea of, oh, now I have to be the best in my class, I have to really represent my family, and I feel like mental health in general from when you're going from secondary school to university is quite like ignored as well, because like me personally, like the fact that like I'm about to go to university next year feels so surreal, like I feel like everything's big I can't believe like I'm finally like leaving this place and I'm about to be independent like that's terrifying to me that's so scary, and um yeah, and like talking about how um... Sorry, mind just went blank there. But when you actually have to go into uni, obviously it's a bigger place and there's a lot of new people and all that. As someone who struggles with pretty bad anxiety, that idea of now I'm going to have to go up to people and talk to them is terrifying. It's so scary. When I think about it, I feel like I'm going to throw up. Yeah I feel like people's mental health, when that transition needs to be a lot more taken into account. So, yeah.

[...]

Okay, so firstly, when I was like choosing my subjects firstly, like in third year I think we choose it, I kind of just wanted to copy my big brother, so I went along the whole like computing science physics type of route and I was like you know this seems cool but it's not really like what I'm

interested in, like I feel like if I went to go do this as a job I'd absolutely hate it and I'd end up just quitting, like, computing is not for me. So this year I ended up completely doing like a one-eighty and I ended up doing more literacy based subjects and yeah I'm planning to do a joint degree so I'm planning to do either law and business or law and economics but like like a couple months ago I was like dead set on doing physics and philosophy, so yeah I'm still like- In my mind, I know I'm going to end up doing law and business or like a joint degree, but there's still that uncertainty. And I'm like, what if I just end up completely changing to something else? Yeah, I'm still not 100%.

Adam, S6 pupil, discusses his understanding of independent learning (01:18)

Well, as I've already touched on, I think the independency and just that huge gap between difficulty is just... I think it's crazy that you can just switch like that in a matter of months and immediately you're just in the deep end not knowing what's going on, and I know especially you have quite a lot of classes especially first and second year, so it's the workload I can only imagine it just must be mad compared to what you're used to. So I think that that's again it's people just being... flung into it without any preparation, without any... and teachers don't even warn you a lot of it. They try and stay away from the subject because they know it puts people off. It's like, oh no, if you're intelligent anyway, they're like, oh uni's this, uni's that, and then... A lot of people go and they're like, I was not told about any of this and it's just, it's a bit, you can't deal with that.

Main task 3: Reassurance / solutions

Summary of Main task 3

Pupils listen to short podcast excerpts from secondary teachers, university staff, and university students, which aim to reassure young people about common concerns.

Pupils then discuss the extent to which these reassurances etc respond to their points raised in the interviews, and to the concerns raised by the S6 pupils in the first set of podcast excerpts.

Relevant podcast excerpts

Layla and Pearl, undergraduate students, discuss how flexible university journeys can be (01:06)

L: And obviously it is really unique with Covid - hopefully that never happens again - but it's just bumps in the road that made it not go how I thought it was going to go, but it did work out so well because if it hadn't, I would have still been in a degree that I found out I didn't really like, and I know myself and I wouldn't- I would have committed and just finished it, and then got to the end and been like, "oh I'm not really happy with that", so I'm really glad how it worked out but it was a bit of a struggle to get there.

P: Yeah I think that's one of the things that is just really not known about uni is that it's a lot more flexible than you think. You can start, you can do a year, you can hate it, take a year out, go back, change your degree. I mean there's so many different options and I think when you're applying to university or what other people tell you about it and generally like the representation of it in anything like films or books, it's just like this, you go, you study, you're done. It's very

intimidating I feel like, so it's really useful to hear people, like, changing things and just basically making it suit them because it's only, I mean even Scotland four years of your life, it's not even that long and that's longer than English universities.

Pearl also talks about her own process of adjustment at the start of university (02:36)

I remember reading a post once and it was the most accurate post about the university experience which just said the pros of university is that no one tells you what to do and the cons of university is that no one tells you what to do, and I read that and I was like, "that's so true," because it's this, like, brilliant experience where you're suddenly like, nobody's telling me to get up in the morning, nobody's telling you what to eat or when to come home or whatever. And you suddenly become the person who regulates all of that for you. And I think probably my piece of advice is more the personal side because for me once I had kind of, like, cemented, once I was settled more in a personal sense, I was then more comfortable doing work and I think that's similar for a lot of people because that's probably the biggest change in university, it's not really the work, it's because you're moving out, and leaving home and there's so many things going on at once. And for me, like, when everything's very unfamiliar, the hardest thing to find can be finding sort of comfort with other people because you don't know other people and it's hard to seek that from them and sometimes, maybe, a bit of an ask and so I feel like last year sometimes if I was feeling, you almost have to seek comfort in yourself a little bit which sort of sounds maybe sad but it's actually not because... What I kind of ended up doing was, I don't know, like, I would make sure I would make time for myself to kind of reenact things I would have done at home with my family, with my parents. So I would sort of feel more at home where I was, you know, whether that was... like my family, we like to go to the cinema and go to the cinema sometimes by myself or with friends just as, like, a little ritual in a way or you know, going, getting a coffee, going on a walk, going to a bookshop, doing, like, little things for yourself to remind yourself of home can be really, really nice because it just makes you feel more comfortable, I think. And once you sort of feel more comfortable and at home where you are, I think you just learn better. You're uncomfortable, you're scared, you're not going to be retaining information in the same way, you can't give as much of yourself over to your actual academic work. So I think that's my main piece of advice is, like, do sort of prioritise yourself and definitely look after yourself, don't think it's... Just don't go out every single night. It's not going to work. It may seem fun for a bit but it doesn't in the long run.

Emily Nordmann, psychology lecturer, offers her thoughts on students' initial anxiety about university in the first excerpt, and why you don't need to worry too much in the second (00:24; 01:09)

So, I think, so one thing I'd say is don't be too hard on yourself, like you are probably going to be a bit anxious and and worrying is completely not- people who don't worry about anything concern me more than people who worry, like, if I have students who aren't worried at all, they probably don't know what's happening. So, I think it is, you know, we shouldn't pathologize a natural level of worry. It just means you care.

[...]

it's not about perfection. It's about developing the skills and you will be better at some things than others. So, one of the things we do in Psychology is, so for the first semester, the exam is

worth 40% and then we have an essay that's worth 35%. But then we also have like a portfolio of small stakes stuff, and they tend to be worth like 5% each. But about- kind of 15% of it is marks of participation. You turn up and you engage, we will reward that engagement. So, actually if you do the 25%, that by the end of the semester, you're not going to fail. So, it's built in. That kind of- the first-year experience is built with that buffer in mind that if you just turn up and do your best, it's never going to go horribly wrong. You might not get the highest grade in the world, but it is built in there, that kind of transition time.

Andrew Struan, head of the Student Learning Development Team, reminds us that everyone is going through the same process of adjustment, making particular reference to the idea of "impostor syndrome" (i.e. worrying that you don't deserve what you've achieved) (00:52)

The fact that somehow you have got here through some quirk or cheat of the system and actually you're going to be found out at any moment and, Oh no, you shouldn't actually be here and everybody else is far more intelligent than you and everybody else is far more read, well-read than you. No, everybody, everybody is going through that impostor syndrome thing. The most annoying thing about being involved in education and being educated is the more educated you are, the more you feel that sense of impostor syndrome. So, yeah, exactly, exactly. But exactly as you say, every new student joining is in that exact same boat of not really knowing where they are on campus, because the campus is big and difficult to navigate, not knowing anybody else, looking for new friendships, looking for new connections. That's brilliant. Like my, my closest-closest friends now, and I started university not yesterday. My closest friends are the friends I made in my first year of undergraduate and we're still best friends.

Summary points from Lesson 1

- It's totally normal to feel apprehensive / daunted about next steps after secondary school!
- Everyone is in the same boat, sharing the same concerns