

Dr Oliver C. Robinson  
o.c.robinson@gre.ac.uk



## The Transitions and Transitional Nature of Higher Education

A key context for understand wellbeing in students and graduates

Flourishing University seminar, Friday September 8

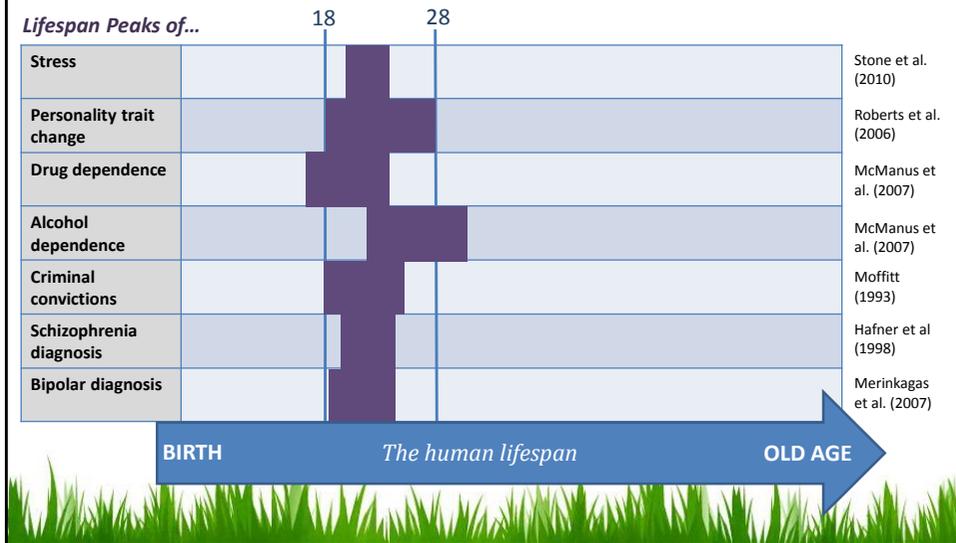
## HE and “Emerging Adulthood”

- Approximately 90% of HE students in the UK are between the ages of 18 and 28, and about 82% are between the ages of 18 and 25
- These students are in a developmental period that is widely referred to as ‘emerging adulthood’ (Arnett, 2000)

Features of emerging adulthood:

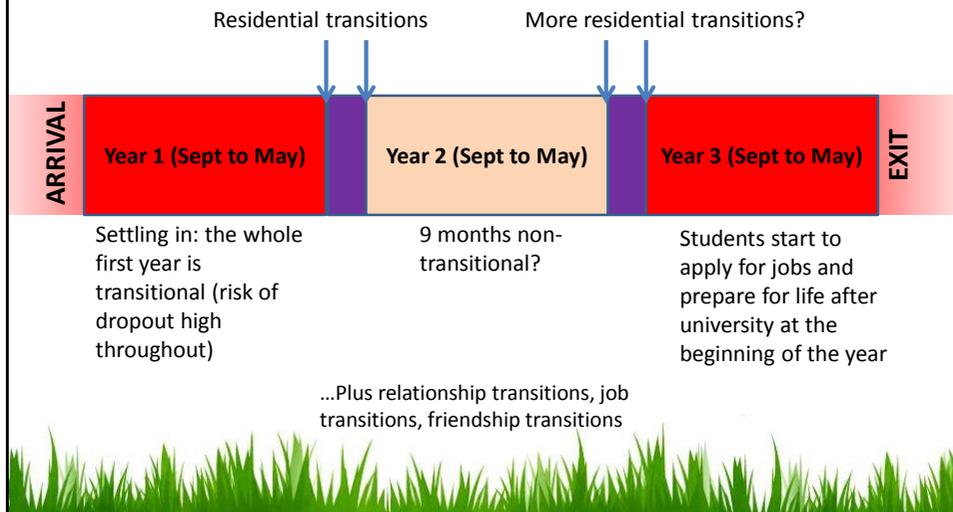
- Ambiguous adult status; in a ‘maturity gap’ between biological, legal and social maturity
- Highly exploratory, non-committal
- Normatively, the most transition-heavy period of the lifespan in terms of relationship, residence and jobs, hence highly unstable
- Intricately related to demographic changes over past fifty years; rise in cohabitation, rise in availability of contraception, delaying of marriage

## A peak period of vulnerability?



This highly unstable developmental period is the context for most who are in university

## An undergraduate degree: A test of transition tolerance?



## The transition in to university

- Leaving parental home for the first time may lead to homesickness, but transition distress is not just a product of that
  - Hughes and Smail (2014): Administered CORE-GP measure of mental health to 350 new students, 63 per cent were found to be experiencing clinical levels of distress
  - No statistical difference in the level of distress experienced between those commuting from home and those who had moved away from home

- Evidence that students who arrive at university lack skills required to succeed, including resilience, time management, relationship skills and budgeting
- Entering an 'alien' social environment

## Transition distress: a psychological process

Gareth Hughes challenges the notion that homesickness is the only driver of new students' distress when they arrive at our institutions

- Radical change to friendship networks
- Cyberbullying and ostracism common

## Wellbeing in the transition out of university: A longitudinal study

**Sample:** 184 University of Greenwich graduates from undergraduate programmes, across science, law, computing, social sciences, humanities, health and social care, psychology

### Longitudinal design:

- PHASE 1 (1 month after leaving)
- PHASE 2 (6 months after)
- PHASE 3 (12 months after)



**Measures:** Psychological Wellbeing (Ryff scales), Depression, Crisis, Demographics, Employment status, residential status

## Depression

- With CESD-10 depression questionnaire, score of 10 or more is indicative of mild depression
- Using this cut-off point...
  - PHASE 1 – 39% showing signs of depression
  - PHASE 2 – 40% showing signs of depression
  - PHASE 3 – 38% showing signs of depression
- No significance in change in depression scores over time, for the sample as a whole

## Phase 3: Living with parents, depression and wellbeing

Independent samples t-tests

- Depression
  - With parents (**10.5**), not with parents (7.4), sig  $p < 0.001$
- Self-acceptance
  - With parents (4.3), not with parents (**4.8**), sig  $p < 0.001$
- Purpose in life
  - With parents (4.4), not with parents (**4.7**), sig  $p < 0.01$
- Autonomy
  - With parents (4.3), not with parents (**4.6**), sig  $p < 0.01$
- Satisfaction with career progress
  - Parents (9.4), not with parents (**10.7**), sig  $p < 0.01$

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-25827081>

## Crisis question

- At Phase 3, one year after leaving
- Retrospective crisis question

– *“A crisis is a time in your life during which your emotions were more negative and unstable than normal, and you experienced changes and transitions that challenged your capacity to cope with stress, making you feel at times overwhelmed. During a crisis people often question things, including their goals, values and sense of identity. Typically crises last six months or more. Do you feel that you have been through a crisis since leaving university?”*

## Findings: Post-university crisis

- 33% of the sample reported in the final phase of the study that they had experienced a major personal crisis in the preceding year
- Compared with the rest of the sample, crisis group were found to show at Phase 1, Phase 2 and Phase 3.
  - a lower level of ‘environmental mastery’
  - higher levels of depressive symptoms
- Crisis was not predicted by achievement in degree
- Personality traits: decreases in Conscientiousness and increases in Neuroticism were more pronounced in the crisis group.

## References

- Arnett, J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55, 469-480.
- Hughes, G. (2016). Transition Distress: A psychological process. *University and College Counselling*, 15-19.
- Hughes G, & Smail O. (2014). Which aspects of university life are most and least helpful in the transition to HE? A qualitative snapshot of student perceptions. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 39(4), 466–480.
- Richardson A, King S, Garrett R, Wrench A. (2012). Thriving or just surviving? Exploring student strategies for a smoother transition to university. A practice report. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education* 3(2).
- Robinson, O.C. (2015). Emerging adulthood, early adulthood and quarter-life crisis: Updating Erikson for the twenty-first century. In. R. Žukauskiene (Ed.) *Emerging adulthood in a European context* (pp.17-30). New York: Routledge.

## Radio show about quarter-life crisis in UK graduates

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01pz599>