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Theme 1

Personal and academic development

This section will:

- Help you to understand more about coping with change
- Enable you to think about what motivates you in your studies
- Help you to know where to go for support when you need it
- Enable you to understand the importance of being an independent learner
- Help you to think about your learning styles.

Education breeds confidence. Confidence breeds hope. Hope breeds peace. – Confucius (551–479 BC) Chinese teacher, philosopher and politician

Theme 1.1

Coping with change

Starting university is without doubt a major change in life, and the term transition is a more accurate way of summing up this experience. The word transition is used to describe a major change in someone's life from one state to another. It can include such things as bereavement, marriage, divorce and becoming a parent; you could also add going to university to this list. Starting university can mean a very different way of life from being at school or college (or working, if you are a mature student) and can also involve living in a different area with people who you have not met before. For international students it can mean a change of country and culture too. Transition is a process not an event, and it takes time to adjust to the changes that are taking place.

During any time of major change, it is common to experience a range of different emotions, including highs and lows, as you go through the transition process. Adams, Hayes and Hopson's (1976) work on transition has become seminal and their seven-stage model describes how many people think and feel during the process.

Stage 1 – Immobilisation. The process is very new and we can have a feeling of being overwhelmed by the enormity of the transition. We can find ourselves thinking things like 'will I ever be able to cope with all of this?'. We can 'freeze' and not know what to do next.

Stage 2 – Reaction of elation or despair. If the transition is seen as positive, we feel elated and might say things like 'this is all great!'. If we see it as negative we can have a sense of despair and think or say 'I wish I could go home'.

Stage 3 – Self-doubt or minimisation. As the impact of the transition becomes clearer, our elation turns to self-doubt and, as our feelings dip, we ask ourselves questions like 'am I really good enough to do a degree?'. Alternatively, our feelings of despair are minimised, and we tell ourselves things like 'maybe this won't be so bad after all'.

Stage 4 – Acceptance and letting go. This is about accepting that the change is happening and recognising that it won't go away. We start to look forward and begin to let go of the past.

Stage 5 – Testing. As we move on into the new situation, we begin to try out new ways of working and living.

Stage 6 – Search for meaning. This is a period of reflection when we contemplate what has happened and explore what the change means for us.

Stage 7 – Integration. We internalise the meaning from Stage 6 and accept the change as part of our everyday lives. The new state then becomes the norm.

These stages of transition show us that we often experience highs and lows over a period of time as we experience change, and that rushing in to make snap decisions (e.g. to change course or drop out because it's not what we expected) without discussing it with someone could be a mistake, as our feelings change over time. It is also useful to know about this for others too, so that we can offer support and encouragement to those around us when they need it.

