



**Compendium of effective practice in
higher education retention and
success**

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Foreword

Professor Julia King

We are living in a time of rapid change and massive global challenge: a time when ensuring that as many people as possible achieve the highest levels of education is recognised both as an essential driver of economic growth, and as the key to delivering solutions to problems such as climate change, food and water availability, and health for all. It is also a time when the higher education system itself is undergoing major changes, not only in relation to affordability and how it is funded, but also in the role universities play in equipping future generations with the skills and knowledge necessary to build a sustainable, secure and prosperous global society. Within this context, the student experience is increasingly important. While producing graduates has always been the major focus of the higher education system, the time has come to make the student experience **the** key driver in policy, practice and performance.

In focusing on how universities can further enhance the student experience, this compendium provides insight into a range of useful interventions that can be applied across the sector. Based on the premise that university education is at the core of social mobility, it is important that institutions go well beyond the conventional curriculum to provide students with a wide range of high level and transferable skills and competencies. Many of the examples given in this compendium have been supplied by practitioners: colleagues who are working in different universities providing a range of innovative support and services to our students. In a number of examples, students and staff work together in partnership – each playing a distinctive role, and together building a well-grounded university education from the early transition period through to graduation and beyond.

As a sector, innovation is critical to our survival. Indeed, innovative practice provides the foundation for universities to ensure that the student experience is central to the future of all learning and teaching activities. The need for higher education institutions to learn from each other forms the central ethos underpinning this compendium. By learning from others' experiences and insights, universities can work together to take the sector forward. In doing so we can bring about certain progress at a time of change; progress that will see our students provided with a high quality, individually tailored and creative higher education: an education that is fit for the future.

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Introduction

As we enter a new era in UK higher education, the need to develop good practice and understanding around the student experience has never been greater. For students, regardless of background, making the decision to attend university is a significant step. The opportunities offered by a period of study are immense, yet the stakes have never been higher. University can be ‘scary’. The excitement of a new stage in a person’s life is often offset against the apprehension about the unknown that is university life. For institutions as well, the demands of new students are increasingly challenging. Enabling student success is top of the agenda, but the challenge comes with the obvious realisation that the student body is both diverse and complex. This requires institutions and learning and teaching practitioners to be aware and innovative in the ways in which they help students engage with study and the wider university community.

This compendium presents a wide range of contributions all focused on improving the student experience in our universities. In identifying ‘what works’ through examples of good practice and increased understanding, the compendium offers colleagues evidence that will enable change to take place in institutions. There are contributions from several of the projects funded through the recently completed ‘Student Retention and Success’ programme funded by HEFCE and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. To complement that work, the structure of this compendium mirrors that of the Programme Final Report. The sections included here are:

1. **Pre-entry and induction:** The contributions explore the practicalities of ensuring informed students arrive at the institution on day one and the challenge of managing student expectations.
2. **Learning and teaching:** Supporting learning and teaching and enabling the development of sound generic study skills are explored through five diverse examples.
3. **Friendship and peer support:** In developing friendship and peer support, peer mentoring has become a valuable approach in aiding student transition, benefitting both mentees and mentors.
4. **Participation and belonging:** The work describes different ways in which institutions are addressing student engagement to develop a sense of belonging within the university learning environment.
5. **Using data to enhance the student experience:** Using empirical research methods, data can be generated to help tutors develop course components and ensure students are adequately supported in their studies and thus on the path to success.

6. **Strategic change:** Bringing about strategic change that enhances the student experience is a goal in many institutions. The six interventions discussed in this section demonstrate a broad and creative approach to realising this goal.

Each entry is presented using a clear structure such that the reader can quickly access the key points describing what was done, why it was done and what was achieved, thus encouraging action where an example of relevance to the reader is encountered.

Mechanisms that can aid student transition and promote student success are going to become ever more important in the higher education landscape. Having said this, it is important that the interventions are supported with evidence that they are going to impact the student experience and are not simply an ad hoc response to a perceived issue. Creating an environment in which students feel they belong is important. This presents an opportunity for a true 'win-win-win' situation in which students succeed, staff develop and institutions thrive.

The future is somewhat unclear, but through continuing to share examples of 'what works', institutions and practitioners can change to better meet the needs of students and capitalise on the opportunities the new era will present.

Section 1: Pre-entry and induction

This section comprises eight papers, each one highlighting a distinctive and innovative intervention aimed at promoting the student experience at the beginning of the 'student life cycle'. Starting with an overview of how technology may be used to provide prospective students with sufficient information so as to achieve a programme's intended learning outcomes, Sue Annetts of Cardiff University School of Healthcare Studies shows how the 'Informed Study Project' at the University is used to manage student expectations. The next paper from Joanne Smailes at Northumbria University discusses a similar approach whereby social networking sites are used to establish 'e-groups' and 'e-mentoring' before students arrive at the University. This intervention enables students to make friends before they arrive on campus, in doing so it reduces anxiety while promoting a sense of belonging before enrolment.

From here, Alison Doyle and Conor McGuckin describe how Trinity College Dublin use a 'transition website' as a means of offering disabled students support before they arrive at the University. Doyle and McGuckin explain how, in addition to allowing students to pre-identify their support and accommodation needs, the site also provides disabled students with access to study skills and assistive technology. Another intervention targeted at disabled students is the pre-induction programme for students living with Asperger's syndrome at the University of Surrey. This 'fully supported' programme, which is discussed by Rob Fidler and Jan Britton, enables new students living with Asperger's syndrome to familiarise themselves with the campus at a relatively quiet time.

Taking a broader perspective, Ed Foster *et al.* discuss 'Welcome Week' at Nottingham Trent University. Developed so as to capture social needs and academic requirements, NTU Welcome Week provides students with the means by which they are able to build personal support networks. While an academically focused induction week is described by Karen Dutton *et al.*, who discuss how the University of Chester Law School has developed a bespoke induction programme that provides new students with a sense of identity, in relation to the School and discipline, while also introducing them to the type of learning experience that they can expect at the University.

The next paper in this first section is from Andrea Jackson and Kate Livesey who discuss the value of an online information and support resource for incoming students at the School of Earth and Environment, University of Leeds. Use of the 'Countdown to University' resource engenders a sense of belonging for new students, while providing the means by which the University is able to align student expectations with reality. The final paper from J. Anthony Rossiter and Linda Gray at the University of Sheffield describes how good practice in inducting, engaging and supporting Engineering students on transition and throughout the first year enables the effective management of student development.

Informing students of the requirements of higher education: a bespoke online solution

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Keywords

- fitness to practise;
- self-evaluation;
- online solution;
- student engagement;
- higher education.

Nature of intervention

The 'Informed Study Project' (ISP), developed by Cardiff University, is a bespoke online self-evaluation providing applicants with the necessary information to evaluate their ability to achieve the programme's learning outcomes.

Focus of intervention

The intervention is both academic and professional in nature. The intervention is aimed at both enhancing the student experience and improving practice.

Description of intervention

There are multiple institutional, professional and governmental drivers that can influence entry and retention of students in higher education. Pre-entry information and transitional support are identified as key factors that promote student success and retention (Higher Education Academy, 2011). Similarly the Equality Act 2010, in relation to anticipatory duty, encourages a proactive approach to higher education (HE). Additionally, Healthcare students need to be aware of the responsibilities associated with 'fitness to practise' (Health Professions Council, 2006). These drivers initiated the development of the 'Informed Study Project' (ISP), a bespoke online self-evaluation providing prospective students with the necessary information to evaluate their ability to achieve the learning outcomes required of the programme.

Prospective students (pilot participants who had received an offer on the BSc Physiotherapy Undergraduate Programme) observed a short web-based introductory video and were provided with web-based text detailing the explicit requirements of the programme. The information was divided into seven sections: lectures, tutorials, practical sessions, workshops, independent learning/self-study, placement learning and assessment. Each of these sections provides an insight into the specific physical, mental and professional demands of the programme. The following text example is in relation to tutorials:

The purpose of a tutorial is usually to provide an opportunity for deeper learning of new or previously explored topics e.g. they may take place as a follow-up session to a lecture. Tutorials usually last for an hour followed by a break, but may last up to two hours. They commonly take place in small teaching rooms with moveable chairs and desks and up to approximately 30 students present. Tutorials are generally of an interactive nature and have a wide range of formats. This can vary from working in small groups, e.g. of 6-8, and presenting information back to the whole group, to performing physical problem-solving tasks as a larger group, e.g. 15. An example of the latter would be a physical team-building exercise (as a means of developing problem solving). If the session is a follow-on from a lecture, students need to prepare by reading the lecture notes prior to the tutorial. Tutorials are generally a good opportunity for students to ask questions they may not feel comfortable asking in a lecture format.

After reading the web-based text, students were required to electronically 'sign off' if they felt they were able to fully participate in the programme. In the event of any concerns as regards their ability to participate, they were advised to directly contact the Diversity and Equality Officer to explore these. To inform their decision regarding electronic 'sign-off', concerns were dealt with in a confidential manner independent of the ongoing admissions procedures. Finally, students were encouraged to complete a Bristol Online Survey to evaluate the ISP.

It is considered imperative that prospective students are aware of the demands of the programme and consequently give careful consideration to their own suitability and preparedness for the course. It is thought that this will help inform students' decisions regarding whether the undergraduate programme at this institution is appropriate for them, and thus inform their decision-making process related to accepting an offer. For those who accept and meet the requirements of the offer it may be argued that such information facilitates their transition into the higher education environment.

[Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings](#)

The purpose of student self-evaluation is to work in partnership with the HEI to determine if they can effectively participate in the desired programme. This relates to the conceptual model in relation to maximising student engagement and belonging, where a more informed

and engaged partnership between HEI and student can lead to improved retention and success. The ISP maximises this opportunity by commencing at the very start of the student life cycle and enabling students to engage with the programme and potentially with appropriate professional services as required. This can create a two-way dialogue between students and staff even before the student enrolls on the programme. This dialogue may well be in relation to academic aspects, such as if a student has any concerns regarding how they can potentially achieve the learning outcomes of the programme. The ISP also provides a gateway for students to access professional services within the University such as the Diversity and Equality Officer for the programme, or the University-based Student Support Services. Currently the ISP has been implemented within one admission cycle of the BSc (Hons) Physiotherapy undergraduate programme; however, the opportunity exists for further implementation across the institution in the future.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

A total of 183 offers were made for this particular cohort resulting in 114 applicants (62%) firmly accepting the offer, 14 making this HEI their insurance choice (8%), and 55 declining (30%). It can be seen that there was a strong preference for making this HEI a first choice in relation to accepting an offer. It is anticipated that further evaluation will establish if the ISP has been a strong factor with regard to applicants selecting this HEI as their first choice.

Ninety-five students accepted and achieved the requirements of their offer; all 95 of these 'signed off', and 72 (76%) of these completed the survey. Interestingly, between 1 August 2011 and 26 September 2011 (when the programme commenced), the site received 212 unique views, with an average viewing time of nine minutes suggesting participants engaged well with the site and that the site received a wide viewing audience. After viewing the site, many unique viewers (24%) then navigated to 'Top Tips for Recent Graduates', although there is no direct electronic link to this separate webpage. This may suggest that the presented information prompted users to engage with other sources that would help facilitate their transition into higher education.

The survey findings identified 99% of respondents reported the ISP provided clear information about the physical and mental requirements of the programme; 86% suggested that the ISP provided them with more information than they already had; 92% suggested that the ISP process was clear; 81% stated that the ISP had either increased the likelihood of them accepting the institution's offer or they already had done so (13% and 68% respectively). Participants were also invited to make comments in relation to the questions. Comments included statements such as:

The ISP clearly states what is required of prospective students, as well as what they can look forward to. (Student from 2011 intake)

Just explains some of the terms used at university. Such as lectures, tutorials etc which can be quite confusing and what exactly they mean. (Student from 2011 intake)

I have been given a greater depth of knowledge about the course from Cardiff than from any other university. (Student from 2011 intake)

Related publications and resources

Equality Act 2010. London: The Stationery Office. Available from:
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents> [22 November 2011].

Health Professions Council (2006) *Managing fitness to practise*. Available from:
<http://www.hpc-uk.org/assets/documents/10001344Managingfitnesstopractise.pdf> [22 November 2011].

Higher Education Academy (2011) *Engaging students to improve student retention and success in higher education in Wales*. Available from:
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/inclusion/retention/EngagingStudentsToImproveRetention_final_English.pdf [22 November 2011].

Website

<http://healthcarestudies.cf.ac.uk/CGII/informed>

Bridging the gap between acceptance and enrolment: mentoring via social media

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Keywords

- social media;
- adjustment;
- mentoring;
- induction.

Nature of intervention

Initiating the academic adjustment process through mentoring prior to enrolment in Newcastle Business School.

Focus of intervention

The intervention was aimed at enhancing the student experience involving a mixture of academic and social interventions.

Description of intervention

Peer mentoring is an established support system for student engagement and retention. However, within Newcastle Business School mentee use of the peer mentoring interventions on offer had suffered a decline.

Technology is now an integral aspect of everyday life. This is especially the case for the common student age group (18-30), often referred to by terms such as the 'net generation', 'digital natives' or 'generation Y'.

Social media is a global phenomenon particularly in this age group. One site, Facebook, is the dominant market leader. A study conducted within the institution in 2008 established



that the site was generally accessed daily and no cultural differences were found in respect to its use.

Therefore, with the aim of reinvigorating the peer mentoring process, a model utilising a Facebook group as a means of contact prior to enrolment has been introduced. A Facebook group was used due to its advanced security features and the availability of additional features not present on a personal account (e.g. discussion board).

In line with traditional peer mentoring models a second-year student was employed and trained as a mentor. They worked alongside staff to create a set of resources, which it was believed would be useful to incoming students. These included:

- an interactive guide to the campus and Business School building including internal room layouts;
- photographs of students from Year 2 students passing on words of advice to the incoming students;
- details of the Students' Union and the Welcome Week activities;
- details of the School's one-stop academic and pastoral care service known as 'Speak to Liz';
- a guide to the referencing style used at Northumbria University;
- a guide on how to interpret the timetable – known to be a problematic issue.

Students were introduced to the Facebook group and their mentor in the standard joining instruction materials. The mentor posted an introduction message and regularly released the resources created; any queries posted by the incoming students were noted and answered. For example, one request related to the reading lists, in particular whether there were any set texts. The reading list, with set texts highlighted, was posted to the Facebook wall. In addition, the mentor passed on details of the second-years who were selling on their textbooks at low prices. The reading list request became the basis for the creation of resource for future iterations.

How the intervention engages students

This early intervention is designed to assist in forming relationships between the students prior to enrolment and encourage a strong bond to develop between the students.

The engagement of the students with each other prior to induction should reduce any potential anxiety, allowing them to settle into their programme of study quickly. Likewise, it was anticipated that the development of these relationships would promote strong attendance and assist in the conduct of future group-based projects.

The new students have access to a reliable and readily accessible mentor who has 'been in their shoes'. The mentor working with an academic (who are effectively invisible, hence

reducing potential stress) was able to address a wide range of enquiries, which assisted the process of social and academic adjustment.

[Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings](#)

The virtual mentoring model lies at the heart of the social sphere. Mentoring is an established concept. However, there still tends to be a reliance on face-to-face communication. Face-to-face contact by its very nature can only begin when students have crossed the University threshold. Through the utilisation of a familiar social space, Facebook, this mentoring process is initiated at a very vital stage when it could be argued the excitement of potential independence still outweighs the anxieties relating to change. Furthermore, this technology can continue to be harnessed to stay in touch with the familiar, which in itself will assist in the adjustment process.

The evaluation of the virtual model illustrated the students' own recognition of the three interlocking spheres and their role in retention and success. Social media provides a platform where the academic, social and professional services can start to be introduced; hence avoiding information overload commonly associated with induction. Students acknowledge the importance of relationships with academic staff, and social media is a means by which informal staff engagement is initiated.

The familiarity of social media provides a supportive environment to develop good relationships with peers and staff alike. This proactive and timely approach can ultimately instigate a sense of belonging to the academic community and maximise the potential for student retention and success.

[Evidence of effectiveness/impact](#)

This new model (introduced in 2009-10 on one programme) was evaluated using a traditional survey approach accompanied by observation of Facebook activity both on the Facebook group and an individual's Facebook walls. All students joined the group; most within days of the group going live. Observations of wall activity also showed that the students quickly became Facebook friends with each other.

However, cultural differences in the use of Facebook were now more pronounced. Facebook is currently banned in some Asian countries (e.g. China). Although international students were found to have Facebook accounts, these were used less frequently and had far fewer friends (both from the cohort and in general) registered on the account. An alternative social media package 'QQ' is now clearly more popular with Chinese students. All but one, an international student, said that they had visited the Facebook group at least a few times, although most noted this was either before or within the first couple of weeks of the programme starting.

Notably, some international students reported accessing the site for a longer period – around six weeks into the programme. This may be an indicator of the additional stress often referred to as ‘cultural shock’ that international students are known to experience.

Students listed the practical resources – timetable and referencing guides; building map and Students’ Union links – as being the most useful, illustrating that academic and social aspects of university life are equally important in the adjustment process. Questionnaire responses indicated that students believed they had quickly developed good relationships with their peers, which they felt had had a positive influence on their intellectual growth. Around half of the cohort felt that the information provided on the Facebook group had prepared them for university life. However, only small numbers felt more confident about joining the University as a result. Nevertheless, most of the cohort felt they had chosen the right university, with two-thirds saying they would recommend the University to others.

Despite the lack of engagement with the Facebook group, observation of individual wall activity highlighted an interesting case in relation to retention. In January 2010, one male student, on his Facebook wall, clearly expressed doubts about the programme and considered leaving. Facebook was quickly used by other members of the programme to pass on very balanced advice as to whether the student should leave or stay. The student posting his decision to stay – a pleasing outcome for virtual support – concluded this conversation. Although the group was only actively used for a short period it appears to have been invaluable in bridging the gap between acceptance and enrolment.

Future models still utilise Facebook, but a non-personal account has replaced the use of a group, a preference expressed via questionnaire responses. ‘QQ’ will be investigated for its potential to run in parallel to Facebook in order to support students from China. Students continue to be consulted on what resources they would like to see, and video-based resources introducing students to teaching technologies such as the virtual learning environment and electronic journal databases are being developed. Students have also expressed a desire for more informal and academic contact with staff. Therefore future models will see Facebook activity and/or advice to incoming students being provided by both mentors and academic staff.

Pathways to Trinity: a modelled pre-entry and first-year initiative to support disabled students in the process of transition from school to college

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Keywords

- disability;
- transition;
- college application;
- outreach;
- intervention.

Nature of intervention

This Disability Service intervention supports students with disabilities across their college career, from pre-entry to employment.

Focus of intervention

The focus of this intervention is academic, social and professional (mixed), taking a strategic approach to enhancing the student experience by engaging prospective students, current students and staff, with the intention of improving practice and implementing change across the whole institution. It is an example of evidence-based practice using ongoing data collection and evaluation to improve pre-entry activities and the first-year experience.

Description of intervention

'Pathways to Trinity' (<http://www.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity>) is a dedicated transition website for second-level students, parents, professionals and other stakeholders to assist with transition planning. The purpose of the site is to:

1. act as a repository for information relevant to all aspects of the application and admissions process for students with disabilities. This includes demystification of the jargon usually associated with these processes, and provision of advice and guidance relevant to applying to any HEI in Ireland;

2. provide access to study skills and assistive technology resources that can assist with leaving certificate study and facilitate a level of academic competency and confidence that contributes to successful transition into the first year of college;
3. identify issues related to transition in order to inform future practices within senior cycle and third-level education. These data are collated from web-based surveys, interviews and a discussion forum.

The site includes pre-entry information on admissions, access routes, course choices, advice from students and lecturers, and College supports relevant to students with a disability. It also provides access to online resources. A 'First-Year Registration' section permits incoming students to pre-identify supports and accommodation requirements prior to arrival in College, functioning as a first point of contact, enabling a smoother and less stressful transition.

Felsing and Byford (2010) identify pre-entry activities as a reasonable adjustment for students with disabilities and argue that "students can have a smoother transition to higher education, subsequently influencing their retention and progression". This study also recommended that strategic actions for HEIs should include public dissemination of information on reasonable accommodations, entitlements and supports.

The Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) Public Information project (2011) surveyed second-level students (n=266) and career guidance counsellors (n=264) throughout Ireland, to ascertain what types of information should be available on university and other websites, in a format that is clear and accessible. Students indicated a need for information on course content and entry routes, clearer and simpler use of language, explanation of higher education jargon or keywords, and provision of a site-specific search engine. Guidance counsellors indicated a need for course-specific information, a glossary of key terms, realistic accounts of programmes, entry routes and student supports. The IUQB recommended inclusion of feedback on the experiences of students in college with regard to specific courses and campus life.

The Disability Service in Trinity College Dublin has developed an Outreach, Transition, Retention and Progression Plan 2010–2013, which will develop clear and effective support systems at all stages of the student higher education journey:

- Phase 1: Pre-entry, admission and the first-year experience.
- Phase 2: Building and maintaining a college career.
- Phase 3: Progressing through College to employment.

Each phase of the student journey is aligned to the strategic objectives of Trinity College Dublin and to national targets for students with disabilities set by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland. In each phase activities are linked to recommendations from the OECD (2011) report on students with disabilities in higher education.

Objectives for Phase 1 of the student journey are identified as:

1. increase the number of students with sensory, physical and multiple disabilities in higher education as stated in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013;
2. engage students and their families, expert bodies, community agencies and practitioners in pre- and post-entry activities in preparation for the transition to College;
3. identify factors that function as either promoters or barriers for students with disabilities applying to higher education.

Phase I is delivered via three strands: the Pathways to Trinity web strategy, the Pathways Outreach Project, and the Pathways Transition Tool.

How the intervention engages students

Pathways to Trinity website

Students and their transition partners require access to relevant information in an accessible format presented in an uncomplicated, jargon-free context. Pathways functions as a 'one-stop shop' where students can identify information on admissions, courses, student stories, supports, finance and real-time assistance with study and examinations, without having to traverse multiple websites from multiple providers. Feedback and suggestions in relation to content are collated via interviews, web surveys, a discussion forum and email correspondence on an ongoing basis, and in this respect the website is organic.

Pathways Outreach Project

This pilot programme seeks to engage students with disabilities during their final two years of school by providing college-based workshops across the academic year. The programme provides students with the opportunity to explore topics such as assistive technology, academic skills, sleep hygiene and stress management, planning a college career, and college application process. Parents and practitioners are encouraged to engage in workshops, which provide advice on the college application process, supporting students through state examinations, managing student stress and setting up a study environment. Sessions are designed and delivered by Disability Service staff and Occupational Therapists, together with sessional input from current students with disabilities in the University. All participants in the workshop are introduced to the Pathways Transition Tool.

Pathways Transition Tool

Students with disabilities should be assisted with planning and recording the steps in the transition process, adapting their goals and needs as they progress through their school career, and reviewing such goals collaboratively with a transition 'partner', be that a parent, teacher, guidance counsellor or other practitioner. The Pathways Transition Tool is a web-based assessment and planning resource structured into five modules: 'Preparing Myself for the Future', 'Independent Living', 'Academic Skills', 'College Application and Course Choices', and 'Identifying and Using Reasonable Accommodations'.

Link to the ‘What Works?’ conceptual model and findings

Engaging students across the student life cycle requires an individualised approach. The dominant conceptual framework of the Pathways initiative is derived from the profession of occupational therapy, which is based upon the Person-Environment-Occupation-Performance (PEOP) model. This model examines the complexity and interaction of factors related to tasks or outcomes to be achieved by an individual. It aligns with the social and professional spheres of the ‘What Works?’ model as follows:

1. person-centred factors: those that relate to psychological, emotional, behavioural, cognitive and physiological features of the individual;
2. environmental factors: considers how aspects of the environment, including social contexts and networks, attitudes and expectations may act as assets or liabilities for an individual;
3. occupational factors: encapsulates all the tasks and activities that individuals need and want to do on a day-to-day basis, such as self-care activities, leisure and work/productivity;
4. performance-related factors: activities and events connected with the above occupations.

The process of transition from school to further/higher education, and progression through the student journey, can be supported using this model. Given the highly competitive, points-based system of application to third-level education in the Republic of Ireland, juxtaposed with the unique difficulties that may be encountered by a disabled student, a PEOP approach makes sense. It facilitates the acquisition of skills such as self-awareness, self-determination and self-advocacy, which are transferable across the entire student life cycle.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

The Pathways to Trinity website hosts longitudinal surveys for completion by students, parents and practitioners, which provide quantitative and qualitative data on the transition experience. One quote from data collected on the website shows the value to potential students and their families:

A lot of universities offer support to disabled students once they are on site, but it is rare to find any that offer help to get the students there in the first place. The Irish DARE/HEAR systems are outstanding (and pretty much unique) in this regard. Trying to find information about disabled access from most universities is like searching for a needle inside a haystack inside a maze ... (Parent comment, Pathways online parent survey, 5 October 2011)

Additionally, feedback on the website has been collected via semi-structured interviews:

It’s really good. It just kind of enlightens you, you know, and tells you what you’re going and where you’re going and how things are done and everything. And you know when you have a disability things are a lot more complicated. (Student, interview, 28 November 2011)

New undergraduate entrants to Trinity College Dublin are surveyed at the point of registration, with 77% indicating that they used the College's main website as a means of extracting or sourcing information. Analysis of visitors since the launch in April 2011 indicates encouraging trends: 5,722 visits of which 3,721 are unique visitors, 61.1% of these were new visits and 38.9% returning visitors, from 76 different countries. Pages have been viewed 15,448 times, and content ranked by popularity is College application, DARE, course choice, study skills and College supports. It is anticipated that these trends will increase significantly as Pathways becomes embedded as a resource at second level.

Access to the Pathways Transition Tool is password protected, but is provided to enquirers who submit an online request form, the purpose of which is collate geodemographic data from prospective users of the tool (student, parent, practitioner, institution, school year, disability). To date, requests have been submitted from practitioners such as learning support teachers and guidance counsellors, in particular from designated disadvantaged schools. This indicates that targeted supports that are freely available to second-level staff are an important transition resource. Feedback about this includes:

I have flicked through all of the 5 units and they look fantastic. I'm going to meet my student today and start to go through the units with him. Your AS video wall and general information also looks excellent. I look forward to learning more from the resources you have posted. (Secondary school teacher, online feedback submission, 7 December 2011)

The Pathways Outreach Project began in October 2011 as a pilot programme with 11 students (four Developmental Co-ordination Disorder, four Asperger's syndrome, three blind/visual impairment) and 13 parents in attendance. Feedback from participants will be gathered in April 2012 in order to re-evaluate/adjust programme format and content prior to a formal launch in October 2012. Students and parents have expressed improved confidence and engagement with the transition process:

Asperger's students are very anxious generally, and desperately afraid of new places, so familiarity with the college they are going to attend would be very useful. They are also unable to seek help, so a one-to-one assistant is vital to help them with finding the help they need'. (Parent comment, Pathways online parent survey, 5 October 2011)

All staff engaged in the outreach programmes participate in a reflexive analysis and feedback process in relation to tracking progress and success of these initiatives.

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Website

<http://www.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity>

Related publications, resources and further information

Pathways to Trinity Website: <http://www.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity>

Pathways Transition Assessment Tool <http://pathways-transition-tool.weebly.com>

Pathways Transition Discussion Forum <http://pathways-to-trinity.weebly.com>

Disability Service strategic plan <http://www.tcd.ie/disability/projects/index.php>

Asperger's Syndrome Support Service <http://www.tcd.ie/disability/AS>

Unilink Service <http://www.tcd.ie/disability/services/Unilink/index.php>

Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) <http://www.accesscollege.ie>

Students with Asperger's syndrome: a pre-entry induction programme

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Keywords

- Asperger's syndrome;
- support transition;
- staff awareness;
- staff development.

Nature of intervention

The Disability Service set up a pre-induction programme for students living with Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC) to support an easier transition from home to University life.

Focus of intervention

The intervention is a mixture of academic, social and professional development, aimed at giving the students a social and academic network. Simultaneously it aims to develop the professional understanding of ASCs among University staff.

Description of intervention

The aim of the Asperger's pre-entry induction programme is to engage with ASC students prior to the often frenetic Freshers' Week, which can be demanding for students. This group of students in particular find transition stressful (Burghstahler, 2001; McEachern and Kenny, 2007) – in order to help deal with this stress the approach described in this paper has been adopted. The purpose of the approach is to anticipate difficulties and help students settle early into campus life.

The approach utilises a model that is based upon a network of support, with the student as the central focus. Using this approach, the induction programme enables each student to become aware of this potential support network between themselves, their academic department and the various support services provided by the University (see Figure 1).

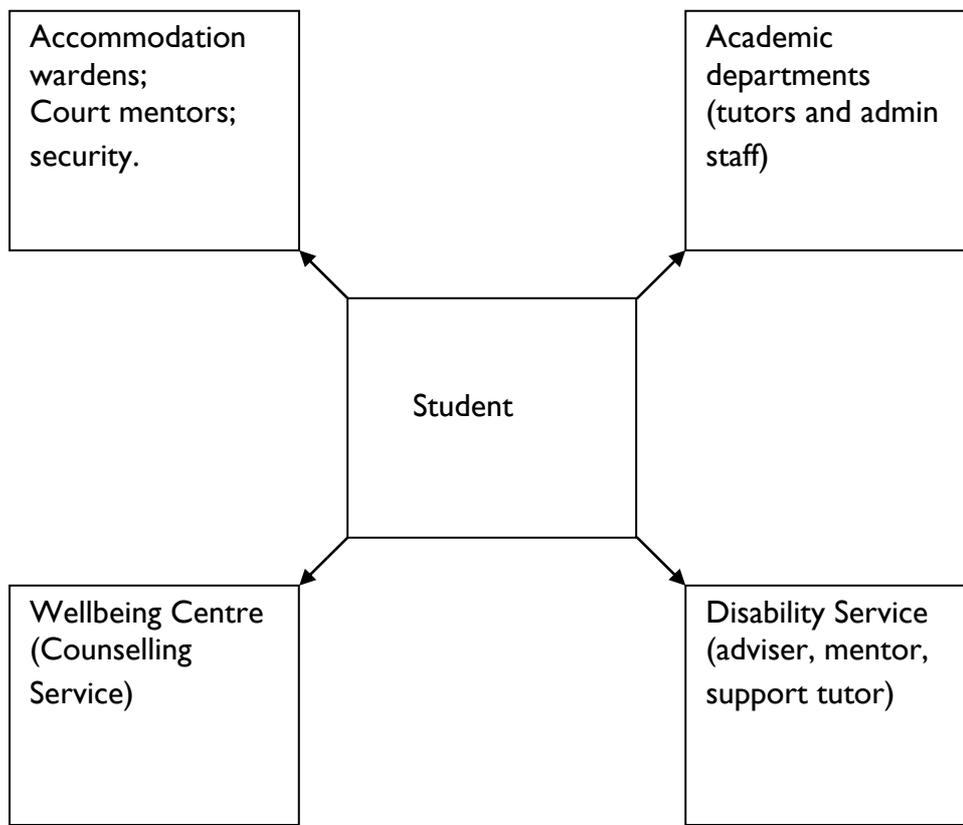


Figure 1: The support networks

During the application process, applicants living with ASC are informed of the three-day induction programme, designed specifically for this group to ease the transition to University and accustom them to their new surroundings. On confirming their admission to the University, the students are invited to attend the programme, and permission sought to advise essential staff of their participation.

Prior to the programme, a staff awareness and student mentor training day is run by the Disability Service, supported by previous year students, who are living with ASCs. The early intervention is aimed to inform and advise staff of ways to encourage and support this particular group of students and to share good practice from other academic staff, disability staff and from the students themselves.

The students embark on three days of fully supported activity, involving meeting their personal tutors and house wardens as well as exploring their academic departments and working environments. They are introduced to the medical, counselling, religious, financial and administrative teams around the campus and begin to use the food outlets and sporting/leisure and Students' Union facilities. Students explore the local town centre with a group of student mentors. The students are encouraged to shop together for a meal, which

they then cook and eat together, in one of the student kitchens. The programme therefore aims to enable students to become aware of both the academic and social environments in which they will operate in. They are encouraged to start to develop their own routine, which many students within this cohort find beneficial.

A further part of the programme enables the students to register ahead of the main body of students, which can be a very bewildering and worrying process. The induction programme is co-ordinated with the academic departments to ensure that the activities do not overlap with department events; this means that students living with ASC can be fully involved with their peer group.

How the intervention engages students

This programme involves staff from across the entire campus, including security, accommodation, academic, as well as support services. The approach has improved staff awareness, and willingness to be involved in the programme has been high. An extra benefit has been the proactive behaviour of many staff in relation to the students they engage with and with comments or ideas as to how the induction programme can be enhanced. As more members of the University are engaged with the programme, support for students is now becoming mainstream. This approach is in keeping with Martin (2008) and Jordon (2008).

During the programme the students meet with their personal tutors, are introduced to department administrators and have a conducted tour of the department. The students, therefore, are aware of where to go for support within the department and where to hand in work or to meet for their tutorials. This helps individual students engage, while the campus is relatively quiet, by enabling them to: identify with their department; locate teaching rooms; and plan routes. Students also have the opportunity to spend time with a learning support tutor, who assists them to plan their social and housekeeping tasks into their timetable.

Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings

The induction programme is part of a strategic approach, with the aim of implementing change as to how students with ASCs are supported throughout all areas of university life. It places the student at the centre of the support mechanism and enables student engagement with their studies and university life from the outset. This encourages students to develop their routine and ease the transition into university (which this cohort of students find potentially problematic). Ongoing support is negotiated by the student with support and academic staff. Staff, via the concept and implementation of a support network, are able to foster effective lines of communication to facilitate individual support needs. This in turn allows for the monitoring of support and student outcomes with the ability for staff intervention, if necessary. This support can transfer across departments within the

institution and also into the external environment via work placements and the professional training year.

The key to success appears to be providing a framework of support that crosses the various spheres in which the student operates to produce a joined up approach with the student at the centre of the model.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

The induction programme has been successful in its aims to improve student retention and to enable the students to study effectively. Feedback from students has been positive, particularly in relation to coming to university early to familiarise themselves with the campus, as detailed by the examples below:

I was in a much better position than the other new students regarding campus services and location.

It was especially helpful to meet my personal tutor and get to know my academic department early.

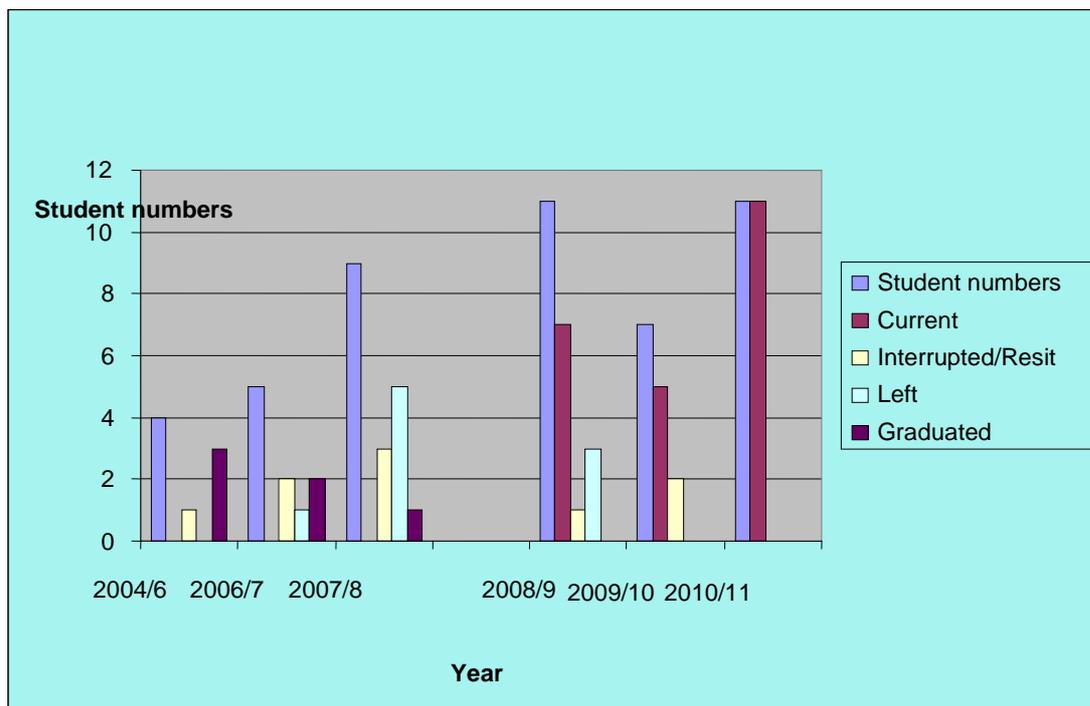


Figure 2: ASC student outcomes/progress 2004-2011

Figure 2 illustrates a general increase in the numbers of students with ASCs entering the University and also a difference in progress/outcomes between before the induction programme was implemented (pre 2008-09) and since. Each year represents a specific

annual cohort, with the first year of the cohort who attended the induction programme in 2008 starting to graduate from their studies at the end of this academic year (2012). Numbers of students failing to complete their studies has reduced and it is felt that the induction programme, based on student feedback, has had a significant impact upon this.

The proactive support at the earliest point has enabled most of the students to become familiar and organised with their studies and to engage more successfully. In the past some students were unaware who to approach when things started to go wrong and this precipitated a downward spiral whereby a small problem 'snowballed' into a much larger difficulty and impacted upon and prevented successful academic outcomes. With the introduction of the programme successful outcomes are hopefully more likely.

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Nottingham Trent University's Welcome Week: a sustained programme to improve early social and academic transition for new students

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Keywords

- induction;
- transition;
- retention;
- orientation;
- Welcome Week.

Nature of intervention

Welcome Week: an institution-wide strategy to help students start to make the transition to university life. It offers both an extensive social programme and has improved student induction.

Focus of intervention

Welcome Week has both an academic and social element. The Welcome Week activities and improving induction thread both enhance the student experience and are a focus for improving practice.

Description of intervention

In 2005, Nottingham Trent University (NTU) replaced the traditional Freshers' Week with a more inclusive programme: Welcome Week. There are two elements:

- I. The Welcome Week programme: Welcome Week is a programme of over 350 academic, social, sporting and cultural activities. It is designed to help students

orientate themselves to the University, start building friendship groups and constructing their own support networks.

2. Improved programme induction: NTU has used this opportunity to research students' transition into HE and used these data to improve the process. This has led to a series of recommendations, resources and staff development activities that have, in time, led to changes in programme inductions.

Welcome Week

Welcome Week is delivered jointly by NTU and the Students' Union (SU). It has been designed to create a wide range of opportunities for students to socialise and make friends; unlike the traditional Freshers' Weeks most events are 'dry' and do not involve the consumption of alcohol. The activities vary in scale, for example we provide a range of intimate events such as reading groups, games of badminton, and trips to the theatre to see ballet or live performances. Many are conducted in conjunction with SU clubs and societies including climbing trips, sports trials or walks in the Peak District. There are many features that students would expect to see such as Freshers' Fairs and nightclub events, but NTU has also developed new traditions, for example a personal welcome from the Vice-Chancellor and an *It's a Knockout*-type inter-hall competition known as 'Saturday Antics'.

Particular emphasis is placed upon creating opportunities for students not living in halls of residence. We provide additional events focused on the needs of mature, international and local students, for example lunchtime coffee sessions, barbeques and evening meeting points.

Improved programme inductions

There has been a continuous process of making small improvements to inductions at NTU. Student feedback has been evaluated each year and priorities identified through a series of focus groups. These findings have been fed back to programme teams through a succession of staff development events and online resources.

In 2011, NTU placed most programme inductions online in a single point, Starting at NTU (<http://www.ntu.ac.uk/startingatntu>), alongside information about enrolment and orientation. In 2012, this will be augmented by videos and other multimedia resources to help students consider life as a university student in the time period immediately prior to starting university.

How the intervention engages students and improves student success

Taken together, the Welcome Week initiatives are designed to help students move through the early stages of the transition process (Tinto, 1993; after Van Genneep, 1960), described by Cook and Rushton (2008) as “early induction”.

Welcome Week is specifically designed to help students feel that they belong to the wider University community and to start building friendships and personal support networks. The focus is therefore on helping students to become engaged with the institution’s social environment (Tinto, 1993). Findings from the HERE Project (Foster *et al.*, 2011) strongly suggest the importance of friendships made at university in helping those students who have considered withdrawing to actually stay.

Our programme induction work is intended to aid students’ transition into the academic environment (Tinto, 1993). NTU student feedback identified five priorities and these form the basis of our recommendations for programme inductions. Students wanted: opportunities to make friends; to be told in advance what the induction would involve; to understand what type of learning takes place; to be reminded how the course would fit their future plans; to a lesser extent, an induction that fitted around needs such as childcare.

Programmes are therefore encouraged to concentrate on reducing the proportion of lectures and providing more small group activities. We provide icebreaker resources and other sample activities to encourage higher levels of interaction at this early stage. In 2011, all programme induction timetables were placed online and students encouraged to log in and have a look at them beforehand. Furthermore, programmes were strongly encouraged to provide their students with pre-induction activities using a similar model to Bournemouth University’s ‘Stepping Stones 2HE’ (Keenan, 2008). These activities were then developed further within each programmes’ induction.

[Link to the ‘What Works?’ conceptual model and findings](#)

Welcome Week provides opportunities for students to engage with both the social and academic spheres as depicted in the ‘What Works?’ framework. Students are provided with the opportunity to begin building support networks among their peers and have a better chance of starting to see how the academic experience will be different from their prior learning.

Welcome Week bridges the gap between the ‘pre-entry’ stage and the ‘in HE’ stage and is specifically designed to help students cope with the transition from one to the other. Increasingly, we are exploring ways of providing more information prior to students’ arrival so that they can start to focus and connect to their new courses.

When Welcome Week was originally conceived, one of the goals was to move students from a state of questioning ‘do I belong?’ to the statement ‘I belong here’. Indeed, Welcome Week has always been conceived as a strategy for helping students to engage with the

University community, either through the programme or more broadly across the institution.

The University has created resources for staff use with their students. These were designed to provide ideas to help students start to integrate academically and begin to understand what is expected of them. These resources have been underpinned by staff development activities and there has been an emphasis on building awareness and capacity in this area. Finally, there has been a whole institution commitment to improving the early induction experience and this has enabled us to improve satisfaction and early student induction.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

In 2005, the programme induction timetables for full-time undergraduate programmes were analysed. The average induction programme lasted for an average of 11 hours and students spent 62% of this time sitting in lectures. In 2009, programme induction timetables were again analysed. This time inductions were, on average, slightly longer (13 hours) and only 39% of all time was spent in lectures. There was also a far richer range of activities such as icebreakers, problem-based learning, off campus visits, small group work, etc.

Student comments about Welcome Week include:

I love the whole attitude in Welcome Week as it was just so easy to make friends at a time when you feel most vulnerable as you are away from all the people you know and trust.

The Welcome Week survey was also used to ask students where they had made friends during their first few weeks at university. Prior studies tend to suggest that the most important location for making friends at university is accommodation. However, at NTU, the most frequently cited location for making friends is the academic programme. In 2011, 80% of respondents stated that they had made friends there; accommodation was only the second most frequently cited location (71% of respondents).

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Targeting induction and programme activities to manage student expectation and enhance engagement

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Keywords

- expectation;
- engagement;
- motivation;
- induction;
- Law.

Nature of intervention

Research-informed enhancement of student induction week activities in the Law School at the University of Chester.

Focus of intervention

The intervention is focused on academic engagement, aiming to both enhance the student experience and improve practice.

Description of intervention

The University of Chester Law School has recognised that fully understanding, and responding to, student expectations and motivations for undertaking undergraduate study is critical in managing transitions to higher education, increasing levels of student engagement and increasing retention rates. This information is vital for staff seeking to truly understand and respond to the needs of the student body. It also allows the identification of any significant 'expectation-reality' gaps in student thinking, which can then be openly addressed in intervention activities.

For the past four years, the Law School has collected data from students preparing to enter higher education (Access course and A-level students) and students in their first week of undergraduate study. Both qualitative and quantitative data are collected regarding student motivations and their expectations. Data are obtained from both focus groups (with pre- and post-entry students) and via a questionnaire administered to all students newly enrolled on the programme on their first day at University, prior to them having any experiences of the course.

Staff at the Law School proactively use the information collected to design evidence-based interventions and approaches both across the undergraduate LLB programme and within outreach work in local schools and colleges. Data detailing the perceptions, expectations and (mis-)understandings of students facilitate open, honest dialogue between academic staff and learners. One of the most important interventions that has developed from this approach is the design of a structured induction week programme for new-entry students on the LLB undergraduate Law programme.

Using data collected, the Law School has designed the first week of the programme to actively respond to the needs expressed by incoming cohorts. Data collected over the past four years have allowed the identification of significant misalignments between student expectations of undergraduate LLB study and the actual nature of the programme. This has been recognised in the wider literature as an ‘expectation-reality’ gap that, if not addressed, may have a number of potentially negative impacts on student retention and engagement (Sam-Banks, 1999; Dutton and Hunter, 2008; Dutton *et al.*, 2010). It is not possible, in this short entry, to elaborate all the different facets of this ‘expectation-reality’ gap, but some common misconceptions voiced by the students include a belief that they may spend up to 30 hours each week in lectures (Dutton and Hunter, 2008, p. 43).

Induction week activity has now been redesigned by the Law School to operate as an intervention that actively and openly addresses these issues. For two days of the first week, students are fully immersed in the Law School, allowing them to develop a sense of identity as students. Sessions and workshops have been designed to respond directly to the evidence gathered about ‘expectations and motivations’. Clear information is provided about the processes of the course, the Law Schools’ expectations of them as students and ways in which this may match, or be different, to what they have anticipated prior to entry. This information is delivered in a way that is responsive to data gathered regarding student ‘motivation’ – their reasons for embarking on study. For example, understanding that many students are principally interested in pursuing the programme to enhance career opportunities enables staff to explain what elements of the programme provide transferable skills and also invite graduated students, professionals and careers advisers to come and speak with the new students on entry. Other activities undertaken include directly introducing the students to the kinds of teaching activity and support that will be available to them throughout the programme; for example, students are required to read an article, discuss in groups and then prepare a 200 to 300 word summary. That summary is read by the student’s personal academic tutor (PAT) and feedback provided at the first PAT meeting at the end of the week.

The induction week activity is just one of a number of interventions that is used both to gather data from students about their expectations and motivations, and to actively address the expectation-reality gap and any misapprehensions about undergraduate LLB study. All aspects of the programme are continually reviewed and modified by the staff of the Law School to look at ways of clarifying and, where academically appropriate, meeting student expectation. School and college liaison involves staff of the Law School meeting directly with pre-entry students in the region and providing talks and other activities facilitating open dialogue about student expectation, and the challenges and realities of undergraduate Law study.

How the intervention engages students

At a basic level, promoting such discussions and making sure the contemporary student voice is heard ensures that both student engagement and feelings of inclusivity and involvement are promoted immediately on entry to the institution. More importantly, however, the data collected are vital for staff in creating an evidence-based understanding to make changes in practice that truly meet the needs of today's student body. Taking the induction week intervention as the prime example, openly discussing and addressing identified needs, expectations and motivations of the student group ensures that students are self-identifying as actively engaged learners as soon as they commence their studies. Tailoring activities and information distribution to address both needs and any potential 'expectation-reality' gaps ensures that students are fully cognisant of what they can expect from all areas of the institution and what is expected of them as independent learners. Addressing potential 'expectation-reality' gaps is widely recognised as critical in improving levels of student success and retention (see, for example, Sam-Banks, 1999; Long and Tricker, 2004; Harvey *et al.*, 2006). Ensuring this is addressed in the first week enables this process to commence at the start of the student learning journey. Providing students with opportunities to learn about, and engage with, all elements of the institutions processes and services ensures that they are fully supported from the first day of their studies – a factor that may be particularly important in supporting non-traditional entrants and those students with little prior knowledge or experience of higher education.

Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings

Targeting induction and programme activities to respond to evidence of the expectations and motivations of the student group relates to the conceptual model of the 'What Works?' programme in a number of ways. In the academic sphere, for example, proactively gathering data from students and seeking to understand their motivations and expectations, prior to and upon entry, provides important opportunities for staff and students to engage in useful dialogue and build the kinds of effective relationships that are likely to sustain student engagement and belonging over the longer term. The approach is also vital in ensuring that staff build a realistic understanding of the student body that enables them to design evidenced-based interventions – such as induction week activities and outreach work in schools – that are more likely to be successful in sustaining student retention and success over the long term. In the services sphere, using data collection and research to identify the 'gaps' in student knowledge about institutional supports and services has allowed Law School staff to design induction week activities and interventions that allow students to find out about, and liaise with, the wider services and support services offered by the institution. This has ensured that students are more likely to engage with these services over the course of their studies and as such, have more support available to them to ensure success. This has been particularly important for non-traditional entrants and those students with little prior experience of higher education, who are frequently unaware of the institutional support available to them to assist them in successfully completing their studies.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Targeting induction and other programme activities to respond to data regarding student expectation and motivation has led to a number of successful outcomes. Evaluations of induction week activity in the Law School are undertaken every year via student questionnaires distributed at the end of the week. Data collected are extremely positive: the

Law School induction week programme is continuously rated as one of the best in the institution and students are overwhelmingly satisfied that the activities meet their needs. During the previous four years, 100% of respondents indicated that they felt welcomed, while over 90% of respondents indicated that the week enabled them to identify their strengths, weaknesses and needs as student learners; enabled them to meet other students; and provided them with clear information about the department and the University. Such findings clearly evidence that the induction week intervention is directly addressing and clarifying expectations in addition to helping develop cohort identity. Further, a questionnaire is distributed to all Level 4 students at the end of the first year detailing how far the programme has met their expectations. Data from this survey have shown vast improvements in the extent to which student expectations are met since the development of the induction week intervention (Dutton *et al.*, 2010; Dutton and Hunter, 2008). Significantly, since the introduction of the intervention, levels of 'induction week drop-out' – the most common point where students decide not to continue their studies – have fallen year on year. In 2011, Level 4 withdrawal was just 7.7% – approximately half the average for withdrawal rates on Law programmes within the sector more generally.

With regard to other interventions informed by this approach, qualitative data collected from students over the course of the Law LLB programme, via repeated focus groups and other activities, have also demonstrated the level of value that students place on the continued dialogue about their expectations and motivations, and the attempts by staff of the Law School to institute approaches that respond to, and actively harness, these elements of their learning experience. For example, a Level 5 respondent in one focus group reported: "I thought the staff would be all old and boring ... it's a lot more friendly than I thought it would be" – a clear illustration of wider student views on regarding how open dialogue may have cushioned some of the more negative impacts associated with the 'expectation-reality' gap. Notably, withdrawal rates at Levels 5 and 6 have been less than 1% during the past four years, indicating the success of the approach. Similarly, feedback from local outreach work with schools and colleges have continued to improve, and are very positive about the value of the work in helping students understand and form more realistic decisions about entering higher education.

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Aligning expectations with reality: an online resource to help with the difficulties of school to university transition and early engagement with higher education

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Keywords

- transition;
- engagement;
- Environmental Science;
- online.

Nature of intervention

An online resource, 'Countdown to University Study', has been developed in the School of Earth and Environment at the University of Leeds to help students with their transition to university.

Focus of intervention

This resource is intended to align students' prior expectations and perceptions of university with the reality of the experience. It supports the School's induction programme and spans the academic, social and professional spheres allowing students to orientate themselves with the School, institution and their discipline before they arrive at University to enable them to make the most of their student experience from the outset.

Description of intervention

'Countdown to University Study' is an online informative and supportive resource that has been developed within the School of Earth and Environment at the University of Leeds in order to align students' prior expectations and perceptions with the reality of the academic experience to assist with the difficulties of school to university transition and to help students realise their sense of belonging from the beginning of their academic life. The resource is specifically intended to help build academic community awareness, inspire development of independent learning/critical thinking, and guide expectations and enhance understanding of the institution, the School and the discipline.

The resource was developed through consultation with staff, current University students and secondary school students, and it is accessible to incoming undergraduates as soon as their place at University is confirmed. Students are invited to use the resource through the virtual learning environment, Blackboard, in order to familiarise themselves with this tool, and they receive this invite through both an email and in a welcome letter sent from the School. Key features include:

- collation of pre-induction materials and support links;
- video welcomes from key members of staff;
- advice from current students;
- degree programme information and optional activities;
- written content to introduce teaching approaches and demonstrate the integration of research within teaching;
- photo storyboards to show fieldwork locations and activities;
- a searchable glossary of terms;
- a forum for students to meet others before they arrive.

How the intervention engages students

Engagement of students with higher education is influenced by many factors with their expectations of the teaching and learning environment being partly driven by their previous educational experiences, their life experiences and their level of pre-university preparation (Lowe and Cook, 2003; Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998; Yorke and Longden, 2007). Mismatch in expectations and a lack of preparation means students can find the transition from secondary education difficult.

‘Countdown to University Study’ is an online resource to support the School’s induction programme and to assist students with orientation at their own pace before they arrive at University. It is intended to align students’ prior expectations and perceptions with the reality of the academic experience, to assist with this transition period and to help students within the University of Leeds realise their sense of belonging from the beginning of their academic life, not only for early engagement and retention, but for later success in learning and professional practice. The resource is specifically intended to help build academic community awareness, inspire development of independent learning/critical thinking, and guide expectations and enhance understanding of the institution, the School and the discipline.

Link to ‘What Works?’ conceptual model and findings

The Countdown to University Study resource operates in all three of the spheres included in the conceptual model. For example, in relation to the academic sphere it encourages students to take responsibility in their first steps to understanding a change in learning style between school and university by inclusion of aspects such as independent learning, critical

thinking and other study skills links. It also provides the opportunity for students to build relationships with key staff from an early stage by identifying and hearing from such staff through video welcomes, listening to areas that academic staff are researching and how that fits into their teaching programme.

The social dimension to the resource is intended for students to form friendships with other incoming undergraduate students before they arrive, and provide them with the opportunity to obtain peer support through questions and conversations with current students via Facebook. The 'What Works?' programme has shown that friendship groups formed early in the student experience are enduring and that friendships are critical to many students' retention and success. The resource is particularly helpful for international students in this regard.

The resource relates somewhat to the professional service sphere in that it ensures that all appropriate links to central support services (student services, library, skills services, disability services, Lifelong Learning Centre for mature students, International Office for such students, etc.) are collated for ease of access and introduced to students at an early stage. It also introduces students to the professional student support services within the School, explaining individuals' roles and how students might interact with them.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

The resource has been in place since 2009 and both quantitative and qualitative evaluation has allowed assessment of the effectiveness of the approach in helping students with their transition from school to university.

Quantitative evaluation shows that the resource has been used by over 60% of incoming students in each year enrolled on 11 undergraduate programmes within the School of Earth and Environment (annual intake 200+). It has been viewed from 23 countries across the world. The pages that are viewed most frequently are: Freshers' Week programme; What to do now; Kit list; People page; Important dates; Things to bring; Facebook; Programme specific pages; and Learn about research.

Focus group work explored whether the students had found the resource helpful for their transition to university, the most and least useful aspects, what other content they would have welcomed, and aspects of the design. The majority of positive comments related to clarity of outlining what students needed to do and when, being able to recognise key staff when they arrived as having seen them on either the 'People' page or through a programme manager video welcome, and the usefulness of hearing advice from the perspective of a student. Comments included:

The Freshers' Week pages helped me know what to expect.

It was good to be able to see what equipment I needed to buy.

It was good for Foundation Year students, I didn't feel excluded.

I was able to identify my programme manager when I arrived and recognised faces.

It was interesting to hear from the perspective of a student and helped with my expectations.

Additional content that students would have liked to have seen included links to specific modules, example lectures, further study skills information, more information about credits and modules, a typical day in the life of a student, and video case studies from recent alumni.

The positive comments indicate that the resource is proving useful in supporting students accessing it in their transition. Resource developments in 2012 will mean that all students will be required to interact with a baseline content (i.e. plagiarism quiz and programme-related activity to be followed through in induction week) in an attempt to be more inclusive in the support provided. A postgraduate version of the resource has also been developed with 'Step up to Masters' supporting all of the taught postgraduate programmes within the Faculty of Environment at the University of Leeds.

Related publications, resources and further information

Lowe, H. and Cook, A. (2003) Mind the Gap: Are Students Prepared for Higher Education. *Journal of Further & Higher Education*. 27 (1), 53-76.

Ozga, J. and Sukhnandan, L. (1998) "Undergraduate Non-Completion: Developing an Explanatory model". *Higher Education Quarterly*, 52(3) pp316-333

Yorke, M. and Longden, B. (2007) *The first-year experience in Higher Education in the UK*. York: Higher Education Academy.

Websites

Countdown to University Study: <http://www.see.leeds.ac.uk/countdown/SEE>

Step Up to Masters: <http://www.see.leeds.ac.uk/stepup/>

Information can also be found at:

<http://www.see.leeds.ac.uk/admissions-and-study/student-experience/student-engagement/>

Teamwork and team delivery: improving student retention

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Keywords

- managing transition;
- teamwork;
- good practice;
- student engagement.

Nature of intervention

This paper describes the implementation of good practice for inducting, engaging and supporting Engineering students, on arrival and throughout their first year. Teamwork enables effective management of student development.

Focus of intervention

The focus of the intervention is academic, social and professional, aimed at both enhancing the student experience and improving practice.

Description of intervention

The practice summarised here is a holistic approach to curriculum design and delivery; that is to consider not just student experience and requirements, but also the more practical issues of how departments can deliver an excellent service in a sustainable manner. Although the authors are based in Engineering, they believe the core ideas within here are transferable to other disciplines.

The two main stakeholders are students and staff, and it is critical that these stakeholders are considered jointly because they are, in effect, partners in the effectiveness of learning and teaching. Hence this section will discuss how an integrated plan based on strong teamwork can deliver good pedagogy that enhances both student engagement and experience, as well as staff experiences.

A first observation is that the student experience is made up of their interactions with all lecturing staff, personal tutors, support staff and professional services, as well as fellow students. Consequently it is important that these groups are all pulling in the same direction and, moreover, in a direction that the students wish to go. There is a requirement therefore for staff to operate as an effective team that plans student activities and development across all modules, and indeed across other aspects of their University life. Co-ordinated action by the team is more effective in enabling students to develop than possibly disjointed

autonomous action by individual staff members, and it gives a framework for handling many transition issues such as social integration, expectations in relation to independent learning and personal study time, understanding unfair means, group work and more. Students who receive a consistent message from all academic and professional staff are more likely to feel safe, and also convinced of the validity of the expectations placed on them, hence satisfied.

The student voice is essential and is a key guide to the academic team. Academics must actively listen to student concerns and feedback and be seen to be listening and reactive. Learning from the students is one of the most important feedback mechanisms that staff use to improve the design and delivery of the curriculum, because students are partners. Of course, at times academic staff may disagree with student requests, but proper engagement with these requests will help staff to become better managers of student expectations in the future and to make changes to the delivery as appropriate.

In more precise detail, the strategy used in the department can be summarised with the following main principles:

1. All staff involved in Year 1 teaching are mandated to be part of the Year 1 team, and to meet as a group on a regular basis to discuss Year 1. Meetings handle routine matters such as ensuring a balance in timing, content and style of assignments, and thus ensuring an appropriate balance of student development, but also provide a forum for staff to discuss ideas on enhancement, curriculum or any other aspects of interest. The meeting is led from the bottom up rather than top down to encourage staff to be proactive – they are more likely to be enthusiastic implementers of ideas they generate themselves.
2. Induction is recognised as something that begins when a student acceptance is confirmed and continues throughout the first year and beyond. The Year 1 team plans a suite of activities throughout the year, beginning before arrival, to help students adjust to the expectations of the programme gradually and also to integrate socially. Simple examples include a technical but fun group challenge during intro week and also the integration of a mathematics diagnostic into both central support services and the Mathematics module.
3. Independent learning and professionalism are key themes in university education, but it can be difficult to convince students of this where only one or two staff actively require it. The Year 1 team plans a co-ordinated approach to encouraging and developing students' independent learning skills and also expecting professional behaviours.

How the intervention engages students

Student engagement and monitoring is implicit throughout the work of the Year 1 team. Assignments and activities are planned to enable regular monitoring of student engagement, but simultaneously the same activities are designed to encourage and reward engagement. Proactive work to encourage regular engagement improves student success and thus retention and also enables rapid identification of students at risk. Several activities are done as group work to improve social cohesion and encourage students to progress by learning from and inspiring each other. The team also embed reflective exercises and peer

assessment activities within all core modules to help students take ownership of the demands being put upon them.

It is also critical that staff are seen as being open to student questioning and requests. Hence there is a weekly 'informal' lecture, which notionally covers professionalism, transferable skills, guest speakers and the like; in fact it has a major role in managing student expectations. However, this slot also provides a regular and open forum for the whole class to discuss concerns with members of the Year 1 teaching team.

[Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings](#)

The good practice discussed in this paper has strong synergies with the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings. For example, there are strong similarities with regard to the importance of a well-thought through induction process.

A project at the University of Reading looked at mechanisms for identifying students at risk by monitoring engagement and progress and then using these data in a feedback loop to focus support. At the University of Sheffield it is proposed to provide quality support and monitoring as a proactive mechanism to help all students progress, and also as a means of identifying and helping those at risk.

The University of Hull considered the need to integrate students socially early on and active personal tutoring. While the Anglia Ruskin University project also showed that the role of the personal tutor is not fixed but important and should be utilised along with a variety of other support mechanisms. The strategies adopted at Sheffield have strong overlaps in that induction and activities throughout the year encourage students to integrate and make new social groupings, while also ensuring effective monitoring and a strong role for the personal tutor. The availability of other support mechanisms are also advertised by academic staff persistently throughout the first year (Patel and Rossiter, 2011).

[Evidence of effectiveness/impact](#)

One key example of evidence of success is actions by the heads of department. Individual members of staff proposed and initiated the Year 1 team in 2006. Following evaluation by staff and students, the Head of Department consolidated this into department structures in 2007 (Rossiter *et al.*, 2007). Subsequent heads have recognised and reinforced the importance of this team and increased the formality of membership, and indeed its functions, to ensure that the relevant staff participate. These moves are key to sustainability and allow easy movement of staff into and out of the team when teaching responsibilities change.

The efficacy of the team is evidenced by the number of radical projects that have been proposed to and accepted by generally conservative colleagues who resist most change. These include major changes to Mathematics teaching, to intro week and, most significantly, to the structure of the year, which had significant repercussion on all programmes.

The second key measure of success is student retention and satisfaction. The team has evaluated a number of the projects individually, but also student feedback in general.

Some typical student quotes from recent cohorts include:

This is a very good course as it combines some of the modules which has helped me to learn more difficult material better.

I am enjoying my course and look forward to next year when I can concentrate on an area of it more specifically.

I won't say that I actually enjoyed my learning experience so far, but I agree that everything that has been covered over the past months has been really useful to develop my character, and my capability as a future engineer. Really looking forward to studying new modules next term!

These courses connect with each other, so students understand new things easily according to other modules. Good.

In general I find the course well structured and all modules well taught. To me it revealed a new horizon in many aspects.

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Section 2: Learning and teaching

This section focuses on student support in learning and teaching. Four different student support initiatives are included, each with a slightly different focus and remit. The first paper, written by Michael Gallimore of the University of Lincoln, constitutes a unique approach to Mathematic support. Through the use of an approach based upon the principles of ‘assessment for learning’, the University of Lincoln School of Engineering have developed a diagnostic tool to not only assess students’ abilities in Maths, but to build a programme of study support based upon the individual results of such assessment. The approach is proving to be a success, promoting student engagement while addressing issues around failure and attrition.

Another student-focused, and exceptionally proactive, approach to study support is described by Stephanie Mckendry of Glasgow Caledonian University. Embedded within Learning Development Centres within each school, Glasgow Caledonian’s approach to study support provides students with the opportunity to gain independent learning skills in a discipline specific environment in which their individual learning needs are not only acknowledged, but addressed.

While Glasgow Caledonian’s approach focuses more on generic study skills, Sue Robbins at Oxford Brookes University provides insight into a more academically focused intervention. The Personal and Academic Support System (PASS) at the University uses a proactive personal tutoring system to address student attrition with discipline-specific and focused small group tutorials. Success has followed with students achieving more highly in assignments and retention rates increasing. A second paper from Sue Robbins details how PASS has been further developed in such a way so that it allows students who are identified as struggling academically, to be individually identified and supported through academic mentoring. This strand of PASS has seen some remarkable results with previously failing students not only graduating, but in one case, going on to study for a PhD.

The final paper in this section comes from Simon Sneddon from the University of Northampton. Research into the academic achievements of first-year students studying for an LLB at the University found that those from a BME background were likely to achieve a lower grade than other students. An intervention was put into place with the aim of addressing the issue without lowering academic standards or expectations. This intervention involved changing how the programme was assessed. Importantly, in changing the assessment, professional body requirements continued to be accounted for, and academic rigour and standards maintained. More importantly, changing the assessment has resulted in disparities between ethnic group’s achievement in the first year disappearing.

Aiding student transition through a novel approach to Mathematics support

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Keywords

- Mathematics support;
- Engineering;
- transition;
- assessment for learning (AFL):
- diagnostic tests.

Nature of intervention

Student success, retention and engagement are improved through a more structured approach to Mathematics support and diagnostic testing.

Focus of intervention

The focus of this intervention is academic: enhancing the student experience and improving practice.

Description of intervention

Since 1990, it has been well known that the level of mathematical knowledge of students entering higher education has seriously declined and that this shortfall not only impacts on their success but also significantly affects student engagement and retention, particularly in Science and Engineering subjects. With the looming increase in tuition fees due in 2012, this problem has never been more at the forefront and many institutions now have a Maths support system in place albeit with varying degrees of effectiveness. A review of Mathematics education carried out by Sir Gareth Roberts (2002) showed that students can experience difficulty in making the transition from A-level to degree level, and this not only has an impact on student success but also impacts on the number of students opting for technical disciplines at universities. With the known huge shortfalls in students opting for STEM subjects and, in relation to Engineering, an estimated shortfall of around 70,000

undergraduates in the power and energy sector alone, the need to put effective measures in place to aid this transition is now hugely apparent.

Secondly, not only do universities need to recognise the fact that students are entering higher education with a lower level of basic mathematical skills, but they should also recognise the ever-increasing diversity in cohorts, from students who have studied more traditional A-levels to students with BTEC qualifications and part-time students from industry and how this requires a more structured approach to Maths support. With the Government's increasing focus on channelling students through the vocational qualification route, universities potentially adjusting entry requirements to meet the demands of the rise in tuition fees, and with industry keen to develop its workforce in order to compete with the worldwide markets, this need will become more and more significant over the coming years.

The first question that should be asked when faced with delivering material at any level is, what fundamental knowledge will the students need during its delivery and how do we check if they already possess that knowledge? This is frequently achieved to some degree by the use of a Mathematics diagnostic test administered to students at the start of their first academic year. There are often two problems that arise from this approach. Firstly, the content of the diagnostic test is often not thought through and the only question it achieves in answering is how strong or not a student may be in basic Mathematics, and not even necessarily the basic Mathematics that they require. Secondly, the test results are not used to inform any sort of learning plan for students meaning that valuable information about students' mathematical knowledge is not put to best use.

The approach described in this paper is a much more structured and informed approach in that attempts to address and extend two of the recommendations set out by the UK Engineering Council (2000) thus:

1. Students embarking on mathematics-based degree courses should have a diagnostic test on entry.
2. Prompt and effective support should be available to students whose mathematical background is found wanting by the tests.

The content of the diagnostic test is driven entirely by fundamental Mathematics skills required for the students first year of studies both in relation to stand-alone Mathematics modules and other core disciplines. These topics are not on the syllabus as discrete subjects and are not topics that are necessarily covered in lectures. For example, the study of vector algebra relies heavily on knowledge of basic trigonometry ratios; similarly, the study of partial fractions relies on knowledge of polynomial division. By selecting the content of the diagnostic test carefully, programme lecturers and tutors are able to obtain a much more informed picture of students' mathematical knowledge. This enables individual learning plans (ILPs) to be developed for those students who show weaknesses in these fundamental areas.

Such students are then invited attend Maths support sessions tailored to address their individual needs. The implementation of this method has had a profound effect on student confidence, allowing students to focus on the main delivered material rather than being hindered by their lack of basic mathematical knowledge.

Following the results from the diagnostic test and the implementation of ILPs for students, the temptation is with many institutions to treat this as a 'tick in the box' and leave students to their own devices for the rest of their studies only to find after that they fall short in other areas of Mathematics, but at a stage when it is virtually too late to intervene. The approach adopted by the University of Lincoln School of Engineering addresses this issue through the use of Assessment for learning (AFL). AFL is a Government strategy adopted mainly in schools to inform students' learning and to improve the rate at which students progress:

Assessment for learning is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 4)

The strategy outlines three major aims that are easily transferable to the way assessment is approached in higher education:

1. Every student knows how they are doing, and understands what they need to do to improve and how to get there. In order to achieve this they must have the correct support in place.
2. Every lecturer is equipped to make well-founded judgements about students' attainment, understands the concepts and principles of progression, and knows how to use their assessment judgements to forward plan; particularly for students who are not fulfilling their potential.
3. Every school has in place structured assessment systems for making regular, useful, manageable and accurate assessments of students, and for tracking their progress.

The Mathematics support approach pays particular attention to these points in assessing students' progress, making students aware of what is required of them and putting the correct measures in place to ensure that they are given adequate support to enable them to achieve this.

The progress of individual students is monitored during lectures and tutorial/seminar sessions using well known AFL techniques such as explicit learning objectives, random questioning, levelled exam-style questions and immediate student feedback. This enables any weakness to be identified. Students' ILPs are continually updated to reflect this assessment and thus students are invited to attend Maths support sessions or directed to other relevant resources to then address the weaknesses identified. This approach allows the individual student to not only identify the level that they are currently working at, but also to see what

is required in order to reach the next level. This also allows the Maths support to be extended to those gifted and talented students who would normally be overlooked by the traditional support system in higher education. This in turn improves understanding and success, ultimately leading to better prepared, more informed and successful graduates and improves engagement and retention.

[Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings](#)

This example of good practice relates to the conceptual model and findings from the 'What Works?' programme both in the academic sphere and in relation to engaging students across the student life cycle. The approach adopted here allows the learning process to be much more student focused and interactive and allows teaching and learning activities and resources to be much more focused on individual student needs. The use of formative assessment allows for instant feedback to students and a programme of support to be put in place to improve success, engagement and retention. The use of pre-entry interventions through carefully designed diagnostics tests facilitates early engagement and allows students to begin developing their relationships with the institution, staff and peers as soon as possible. The support offered in the early stages is then continued through the use of assessment for learning in order to aid the students' transition into higher education. Due to the success of the approach in the School of Engineering, this is now being considered as a method of developing Maths support across the whole institution.

[Evidence of effectiveness/impact](#)

The success of this approach has been measured in relation to three areas; student success, engagement and retention. It is felt that the overall success of this approach can be measured ultimately through retention data as success and engagement have a large influence on this. Comparisons have been made between the data for the University of Lincoln School of Engineering and the Engineering benchmark data. It was found that the percentage of young entrants to full-time degree courses in 2008-09 who were not retained was 8.8% for Engineering courses compared to 6.5% for all subjects. This included students with significantly higher entrance qualifications than those at Lincoln. The attrition rate for the University of Lincoln in this category was 0%, i.e. all students were retained.

The percentage of mature entrants to full-time degree courses in 2008-09 who were not retained was 15.8% in Engineering compared to 12.9% for all subjects. The attrition rate for the University of Lincoln for this category was 5%.

Student success is indicated by these retention figures as the students who were not retained left due to personal circumstances rather than underachievement. Student engagement has been measured through regular student feedback facilitated through the use of feedback forms administered to students three times per year for each studied module. The feedback gained from students showed that subjects underpinned by Mathematics

received high scores in the areas of understanding and interest. Discussions with students showed this to be related significantly to their underlying knowledge of the fundamental mathematical principles required and gained through the Maths support system. In short, the approach allowed them to focus their studies on the material being taught.

This analysis has shown that, through this novel approach to Mathematics support, there is a marked increase in student engagement and success leading to a significant increase in student retention compared to national benchmark figures.

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The Learning Development Centre: an embedded approach to academic and digital literacies that positions the central within the academic

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Keywords

- learning development;
- embedded support;
- academic literacies;
- digital literacy;
- widening participation.

Nature of intervention

Embedded and enhancement-led learning development and ICT skills support in the School of Health and Life Sciences at Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU).

Focus of intervention

The intervention is a conscious blending of the academic and the social and is designed to improve practice and enhance the student experience.

Description of intervention

Following restructuring at Glasgow Caledonian University, learning support has been embedded within Learning Development Centres (LDCs) in each school. LDCs are staffed by academic development tutors (ADTs) and ICT skills tutors and are designed to provide tailored, enhancement-led support to learners throughout the student life cycle, from initial transitions and 'learning to learn' in HE skills through to graduate attributes and postgraduate research and writing skills. LDCs also play a significant role in co-ordinating the student learning experience at school level, with staff represented on programme and curriculum development boards and learning and teaching committees, for example.

Utilising the 'built-in' as opposed to 'bolt-on' model of learning development (Wingate, 2006), the LDC within the School of Health and Life Sciences has adopted a devolved approach. This provides an opportunity for 'independent learning' skills such as academic writing and critical analysis to be given a subject-specific context. Each ADT has responsibility for named programmes and discipline areas, allowing them to design learning and teaching activities to appeal to the specific demands, literacies and motivations of that group, thus blending the central and academic spheres of university life. So, for example, Nursing and Healthcare students are encouraged to gain critical evaluation skills as part of their professional development into evidence-based practitioners (Mckendry *et al.*, 2011). Healthcare students are also offered discipline-specific learning and teaching activities on reflection or evaluating health research, for example. Whereas in complementary streams of workshops, Psychology and Life Science students are offered opportunities to develop and refine their report writing and statistical analysis skills.

The location of both academic and ICT skills development in one centre allows for the provision of digital literacy support alongside learning development, the creation of innovative learning spaces, better collaboration and the incorporation of technology into all aspects of learning development. Initiatives have included the creation of a student nurse blog to allow students to interact with peers and staff while learning in the clinical area, the development of a website targeted at FE Social Work students to aid their transition into HE, and online delivery of 'byte' sessions on the use of technology.

How the intervention engages students

The LDC engages students through a proactive approach to learning development with a mix of workshops, one-to-one appointments, blended learning activities and timetabled sessions within modules. These teaching and learning activities are intended to provide students with the academic skills necessary for successful completion of their programme. In addition, each ADT has a co-ordinating role in relation to targeted student cohorts deemed particularly vulnerable or requiring additional engagement to facilitate success. For example, one ADT is involved in a project exploring the use of reusable multimedia learning objects to support college students making the transition from FE to HE. Specifically, a package of interactive annotated PowerPoint tutorials and video clips, carefully tailored to the needs of Social Work students, have been developed to assist learners in clarifying expectations, developing academic skills and reducing anxiety associated with university study. Following an evaluation, which is currently taking place in 14 local colleges, the materials will be embedded within a website aimed to improve transition and progression.

ADTs are employed on academic contracts and actively participate in research and scholarly activities. This not only ensures that their learning and teaching practice is firmly embedded in evidence and research, but also promotes engagement and collaboration with the wider academic community. Members of the LDC have research interests in the student experience, international students, academic literacies, widening participation and the use of

technology in higher education among other topics. They also utilise institutional data to evaluate and direct their activities.

[Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings](#)

The conceptual model notes that non-traditional learners tend to spend less time on campus and can thus miss out on the social and professional spheres of higher education. GCU, as a widening participation institution, has responded by integrating aspects of both into the academic sphere. The School of Health's Learning Development Centre provides central learning support within the students' academic context, the most central of the spheres. The LDC's emphasis on peer learning in workshops rather than through individual appointments also encourages students to engage with the social sphere.

In addition, the LDC promotes engagement throughout the learner life cycle, something the empirical research suggests is important in student success. It also attempts to develop students' knowledge, confidence and identity as successful higher education learners. The underlying pedagogical philosophy is one of 'academic literacies' (Lea, 2004), making explicit to students the expectations that staff have of their work and providing support as students develop the skills necessary to meet those expectations. The LDC also emphasises the strong role of emotion in learning and the impact this can have on student confidence and participation (Christie *et al.*, 2008; Beard *et al.*, 2007), thus developing activities attempting to increase self-belief within learners.

[Evidence of effectiveness/impact](#)

The activities of the School of Health's Learning Development Centre are modelled on the philosophy and activities of its forerunners, school-based academic development tutors, who had been in post for upwards of three years. There is, thus, ample evidence of the effectiveness of this form of learning development support. For example, the ADTs were highlighted in the 2011 Quality Assurance Agency ELIR report as evidence of "good practice in delivering specific and contextualised learning support for students". They were also commended by the Nursing and Midwifery Council when validating the new Nursing degree programme.

There has been a dramatic increase in student attendance at learning development workshops, increasing from 191 in 2008-09 to 558 in 2010-11. In addition, the number of tailored embedded sessions delivered within modules rose from 41 to 88 in the same time period, evidencing increased engagement with both staff and students in the School.

A number of projects targeting specific groups of learners at key stages in the student life cycle have been positively evaluated by participants. For example, in both years in which a pre-entry Summer school programme was designed and delivered by ADTs, 94% of students rated the experience as 'very useful' and 6% as 'useful'. In a more detailed qualitative

evaluation, all participants expressed overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards the week and believed it prepared them for university study and contributed to their academic success. Similarly, evaluation of a project to develop a weblog on learning in clinical placement for Nursing students provides evidence of the effectiveness of ADT, and therefore LDC, activities. This web-based resource provided students with assessment-specific learning development while on placement as well as peer support through student contributions. 85% of student respondents rated the initiative as 'useful' or 'very useful' and the site had recorded over 4,500 visitors in six months.

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PASS: Personal and Academic Support System – proactive support for students

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Keywords

- personal tutoring;
- academic skills;
- student engagement;
- first-year support.

Nature of intervention

The PASS programme of group tutorials with personal tutors, developed in Life Sciences at Oxford Brookes University, teaches academic skills and builds good working relationships between staff and students.

Focus of intervention

This is an academic intervention aimed at improving both student practice and enhancing the student experience.

Description of intervention

PASS (Personal and Academic Support System) in Biosciences at Oxford Brookes University uses proactive personal tutoring as part of its holistic student support model. It was developed in response to poor student retention statistics (83% retention in 2004-05), which was traced to students not knowing who to go to for help if they were experiencing problems, then dropping out. The electronic student management system brought in by the University had replaced the need for students to see their personal tutor at the beginning and end of each term (six times a year) for signatures to forms. Students said that they did not know their personal tutor and revealed that some of their classmates had dropped out of university because they did not know who to go to for help. They were too embarrassed to go to a stranger.

Research undertaken through the ‘What Works?’ Student Retention and Success programme revealed that students value relationship with their personal tutor and being known by them. They said that this contributes to their academic success, improves their student experience and promotes their persistence. Many sources (Hixenbaugh, 2006; Yorke and Longden, 2007) confirm the importance of access to a human face in higher education and the risk of student drop out when it is absent.

PASS tutorials are designed to bring academic staff and students together in a non-threatening environment so that working relationships develop naturally. Personal tutors hold group tutorials with their first-year tutees four or five times each semester, delivering academic skills training and facilitating the academic transition from learning in school to more advanced study at university. Tutors are allocated tutees strictly according to the science discipline being studied, matching staff teaching interests with student degree subject. This gives staff and students a common point of contact that has been found to motivate both staff and students.

PASS tutorials are situated within a taught skills module that is compulsory for all students. There is assessed coursework set through PASS tutorials that contributes 30% of the module assessment. The tutorial programme covers academic skills including time/task management, referencing and academic standards (including University regulations on cheating), researching and writing an academic essay in science, recording practical work in a laboratory notebook, writing scientific reports, group-working skills, understanding feedback and using it to improve future work, and preparing for examinations. There is a pocket-sized textbook, *Science Study Skills* (Robbins, 2009), and an in-house handbook that the students use for reference.

PASS tutorials develop good working relationships between staff and students that persist throughout the students’ time at the University. Since they know a member of staff and are known by them, they feel more able to approach their personal tutor if they are experiencing problems with their studies or in their personal lives. Not all staff feel confident about dealing with personal issues, so PASS Referral was introduced as a safety net for students with personal issues affecting their ability to study effectively. Staff refer their tutees, or students self-refer, to a named academic with counselling-style listening skills, who can help the student work out a way forward through their difficulties. Where appropriate, students are referred on to specialist help provided by professionals such as counsellors in Student Services. The academic member of staff keeps in touch with these students while they are having counselling, helping them to catch up academically as they address their personal issues with specialists.

How the intervention engages students

Meetings between tutors and tutees take place every two to three weeks throughout the first year and this builds a sense of belonging for the students. They identify with their discipline through their tutor and build cohort identity with their peers, working together and supporting one another. This is important for the students as formal teaching takes place in lectures of about 250 students and laboratory classes of 24 students. PASS tutorials provide a small group (eight students) environment that promotes discussion and learning in a more informal context.

The content of PASS tutorials has been developed over a period of six years to meet the needs of science students in their first year. Some of the topics are generic to all undergraduates, others are bespoke for scientists. All help students with the transition from secondary education to study at tertiary level. This has improved student performance in their specialist modules since the skills developed are transferable to other contexts, which has improved the quality of student work. Student satisfaction with staff support has improved and student retention from first to second year has risen.

Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings

The PASS tutorial system fits with the academic sphere of the conceptual model and builds staff and student capacity. It is an integral part of the academic provision for students, delivering academic skills training and development through bespoke activities that enhance student understanding of the academic environment that they have entered. They learn and practice skills transferable to their specialist modules (researching, referencing, essay writing, report writing, group working) through working with academic staff.

Academic staff engage with individual students in this small group context and there has been an increase in staff awareness of student issues. Staff have become more involved with supporting their tutees through the increased contact provided by PASS tutorials.

Students benefit from the teaching and training that they receive through PASS tutorials, helping them to perform at a higher academic level in assignments and assessments. Explaining staff expectations in an academic context helps students to understand how they can improve their performance and benefit from acting on feedback on their work. Students value meeting with their tutor and are more open to asking for help if they are having difficulties, rather than trying to go it alone and becoming academic (and often emotional) casualties.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Staff tutorial delivery has risen from 62% of expected tutorials in 2005-06 (number of tutorials multiplied by number of staff) to 96% in 2009-10. Student participation began at

42% of possible attendances (number of tutorials multiplied by number of students) and has levelled out at 67%. This means that many students are not attending all their tutorials, not that a third of students are non-attenders.

Research was undertaken by an independent researcher in order to evaluate staff perspectives of the value of PASS. Staff quotes included:

PASS tutorials are an organised and effective means of supporting students and providing essential guidance and information.

PASS sessions provide a forum for students to discuss problems with their tutor and peers.

The sessions are very well organised, with content that ensures all students are familiar with basic skills such as note-taking, referencing, planning, exam revision.

Inevitably it has taken time for some academics to fully engage with the PASS tutorial system. Initially there was some staff resistance to this proactive approach, evidenced by some tutors not delivering their tutorials, but since embedding tutorials into a taught module with assessed coursework, staff compliance rose to 96% in 2009-10. The module context enables tutorial hours to be written into staff workload plans. Now that PASS is part of the culture in Life Sciences, reviews document that staff see the benefit to their students and for themselves in building working relationships with their tutees.

In addition to evaluating staff perceptions, the research also looked at the students' perspectives. Student quotes included:

PASS tutorials help ... with the course ... with scientific writing, note-taking, referencing, making module choices.

... they were all very helpful and constructive.

Others found that the PASS tutorials made them more reflective about how they work and described how their personal tutor worked with them by going through different ways to study. Others were pleased that through group meetings they got to meet new people and made new friends.

Students interviewed were asked what they thought the role of a personal tutor to be. Quotes included:

They provide support, life support!

If I don't know who to go to for help with disabilities or dyslexia ... I go to my Personal Tutor and expect her to point me in the right direction.

[My Personal Tutor is] someone who I know within the establishment, who, when I think that everything is just a bit too much, can step in and help me.

Students find it helpful that when they have something on their mind they can go and see their personal tutor about it, with one student describing the support from their personal tutor as “brilliant from day one”.

PASS tutorials have contributed to improved student progression and retention statistics that have risen from 83% in 2004-05 to 92% in 2007-08, an improvement that has been sustained to date. This has been attributed to integrated and holistic student support through PASS and the tutorial system is key to this.

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Related publications, resource and further information

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[11 January 2012]

http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/AAT/NW33_3.htm#7

[11 January 2012]

PASS Intervention: mentoring poorly performing first-year students and turning their academic performance around from failure to success

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Keywords

- first-year attrition;
- academic mentoring;
- student support.

Nature of intervention

Academic mentoring developed in Life Sciences at Oxford Brookes University, but readily transferable to other disciplines.

Focus of intervention

This intervention is academic, but where personal issues are identified these are addressed. The aim is to enhance the student experience thereby improving student success and progression from the first year to second year.

Description of intervention

PASS (Personal and Academic Support System) is an integrated suite of interventions that support Bioscience students. All first-year students receive proactive personal tutoring through structured group PASS tutorials with their personal tutor. This builds good staff-student working relationships that continue throughout the students' time at the University, facilitating them approaching a member of staff if they have problems. There is a PASS safety net referral system for students with non-academic issues that interfere with their ability to study effectively.

Despite this support, each year about 10% (20+) of first-year Bioscience students perform so badly in their first semester assessments that it is anticipated that they will be excluded

from the University following the Summer assessments. PASS Intervention was designed to investigate why individual students were performing so badly and to put in place measures to address this issue. Such students were picked up after their first semester results had been ratified and they were invited to attend individual interviews. Efforts had been made to motivate students who were falling behind during their first semester, but this was not effective because they did not believe that they would fail. Poorly performing students needed the wake-up call of seeing fail grades on their transcripts before accepting the reality of their situation.

As first semester results were released, individual letters were sent to students with multiple failed modules requiring them to attend an appointment at the start of the new semester. In conducting these interviews care was taken not to jump to conclusions about reasons for failure. The meetings were kept open and positive for the students, since often they were in shock about their poor performance.

At this first meeting they were shown a printed copy of their results and asked whether they were expecting those results. If they said yes, then they were asked why. If they said no they were unexpected, they were asked why not. This non-threatening approach allowed the student to open up about what was happening in their life. Usually at this point a variety of issues came tumbling out.

On the first run of PASS Intervention it became clear that many of these failing students had been facing enormous personal difficulties that they had not disclosed to staff during the semester, such as bereavement, terminal illness of a parent, their own illness, financial difficulties, etc. They had struggled on against this background thinking they could cope. They were offered support for their personal issues and, where appropriate, referred to professional help such as counselling through Student Services. For severe cases there was a hotline to the Director of Student Services who would get students cancellation appointments with a counsellor at short notice, in the knowledge that students were being filtered and only the most vulnerable were being fast-tracked to support.

Inevitably there were also students who had underachieved due to distraction and lack of engagement, inability to organise their time and manage their deadlines. Each failing student was offered mentoring support throughout their second semester, whatever the reason for their underperformance. The student signed up to say that they would attend mentoring meetings every four weeks. The four-week timescale gave the students enough time to take responsibility for their work, but not so much time that if they failed to meet their targets they would be lost.

The first meeting involved planning the tasks that the student would tackle during the next four weeks, teaching time management and prioritisation of tasks. At the next meeting the student was held accountable as the mentor asked very specific questions about the modules they were studying, coursework set, results from tests, etc. As an academic, the

mentor had access to student information and was able to assess students' academic problems. She talked to her colleagues teaching first-year students and they alerted her to problem students, enabling her to keep tabs on the students throughout the second semester.

How the intervention engages students

The success of PASS Intervention has been through one-to-one mentoring, holding students accountable for their own academic progress. Walking alongside students as they recover themselves has been effective. They have to do the work, but having a mentor encourages them to keep going and maintain focus. This has been life-changing for those students who were turned around from failure to success. Their self-esteem and employability chances were raised through mentoring for academic success.

Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings

PASS Intervention fits into the academic sphere of the 'What Works?' conceptual model, linking with student capacity building. It engages the student in educationally purposeful activities directed through individual mentoring that teach the student to manage their own learning. Having improved their academic skills, the student can then go on to put these into practice on their own during their next year of study. Building the student's capacity for engaging with their studies is fundamental to their future success and enhances that student's experience of higher education.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Three cohorts' data for PASS Intervention show that the majority of students attended their initial interview and availed themselves of the support on offer. Every student who did not respond to the invitation for mentoring support failed their second semester assessments and was excluded from the University. 88% of the students (n=56) who were mentored through PASS Intervention were retained the following year; 75.5% of these continued for a second year; 90% for a third year, when some graduated with their original cohort. Others continued for a fourth year to graduation.

Graduation data

Of the 56 students mentored, 27 have graduated with Honours degrees: two first class; five upper second class; 16 lower second class; four third class. Three graduated with ordinary degrees. One left with a Certificate of Higher Education; three others are still in the system. Considering that all 56 students were expected to be excluded at the end of their first year, to have 30 (and up to 33) graduate with BSc degrees is outstanding. This is a 54-59% graduation rate for students who were expected to leave the University with no new qualifications.

One of the two students graduating with a first class degree had previously failed at another university. When he was interviewed after failing his first semester he was very despondent and took some convincing that he could succeed. The mentor encouraged the student by saying that she believed that he could turn himself round for success if he believed in himself. The student decided to step out and be positive about his abilities, agreeing to work with the mentor. As mentor and student worked together, he began to understand what tertiary level study involved and week by week made progress. He retrieved all his failed modules through passing resits and passed all second semester assessments, then went on to excel in the subsequent two years, graduating with a first class degree with the rest of his cohort. He then studied for a Masters degree, where he obtained his MSc with Distinction, and now he is studying for his PhD at an American university. He says that had he not been sent the letter at the end of his first semester inviting him in for a meeting, he would not have returned to Oxford Brookes after Christmas in his first year.

Student retention in Life Sciences improved from 83% in 2004-05 to 92% by 2007-08 and this improvement has been maintained to date. The Dean has attributed this to PASS, and PASS Intervention has made a significant contribution to better student progression and success.

Equality in Legal Assessment 2 (EILA2)

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Keywords

- Law;
- assessment;
- equality;
- diversity.

Nature of intervention

Revision of student assessment in Law at the University of Northampton.

Focus of intervention

This is an academic intervention, aimed at both enhancing the student experience and improving practice.

Description of intervention

This project built upon a 2008 study (Crofts and Sneddon, 2009) looking at the achievement of different types of Law students in the various types of assessment between the academic years 2002-03 and 2007-08. The 2008 study was triggered by evidence that there was a difference in student attainment in other disciplines (see, for example, REACH, 2007; HEA/ECU, 2008) and a desire to discover whether this applied in Law. The students were categorised as 'different types' based on gender, ethnicity, age and declared disability. The quantitative element of the 2008 study looked at the results of all LLB students for each element of assessment on all compulsory Law modules, leading to a total of over 10,000 individual grades.

The focus, which was on LLB students and compulsory modules, not joint Honours students or elective modules, was threefold: all the students would complete all the modules; all will

have met broadly similar entry criteria; and, there had been little change in the compulsory modules (as dictated by the professional bodies).

The results showed that there was no statistically significant difference between the students' performance when separated by age, gender or declared disability. It did, however, discover that there was a significant difference in performance between White students and BME students (see below). The BME students were not disaggregated into different groups so as to prevent the identification of any students whose ethnicity was only sparsely represented.

Data at the time from UUK/HESA (HESA, 2007) suggested that, on average between 14 and 16% of students applying to UK HEIs were from BME background. The 2010 UUK/HESA figures show a median of 11% (UUK, 2011, p. 34). Those figures for the LLB at the University of Northampton were 52% BME students in 2006-07 and an average of 56% for the three years of the EILA2 study.

The 2008 study showed that at Level 4, the overall difference between the performance of BME and White students was the difference between a D+ grade for the BME students and a C grade for the White students.

The qualitative part of the study involved student participants from the 2007-08 academic year taking part in focus groups and anonymous online feedback (via Blackboard). Four students took part in each of the two focus groups, and six students submitted written responses. Thematic analysis (following the model of Braun and Clarke, 2006) of the responses showed that assessment was a cross-cutting theme, and concerned all of the student participants.

As a result of the 2008 study, a revised assessment strategy was adopted for the four compulsory Level 4 (Year 1) LLB modules from 2008-09 onwards (see below). EILA2 took the student results for those modules for 2008-09, 2009-10 and 2010-11 and applied the same analysis as the earlier study, in order to assess the impact of the changes that had been introduced, and ascertain whether the predicted reduction on the gap in attainment between BME and White students had materialised.

Prior to the 2008 study, the four compulsory LLB Level 4 modules were assessed in seven different ways:

- short assignment (1,000 words);
- long assignment (2,000 words);
- time-constrained assignment (typically 40 minutes, in term time);
- formal examination (typically two hours);
- seminar participation;
- short answer test;

- group presentation.

As a result of the 2008 study, the new strategy used only three types of assessment:

- time-constrained assignment (problem-question based);
- time-constrained assignment (essay based);
- formal examination (two hours).

There was some discussion at the time of removing the formal examination element of assessment, but the LLB course is bound by the professional body accreditation by the Joint Academic Stage Board, which requires this type of assessment to be used in an LLB. The time-constrained assessments (TCAs) were chosen as the other parts of the strategy as the results indicated that the difference between BME and White students was among the smallest.

The intention of the intervention was that the academic rigour of the course would be maintained while reducing the attainment gap between BME and White students. EILA2 has focused on the students' performance at Level 4.

How the intervention engages students

The intention of this intervention is to improve retention rates among all students, but particularly BME students. Based on the argument of Healey *et al.* (2006), who were writing in the context of students with a disability, the approach was taken that interventions designed to improve performance in one group may also benefit those from outside that group. In other words, the revised assessment strategy should be designed to narrow the gap by helping BME students, rather than disadvantaging White students.

The better the students perform at Level 4, then the less likely that are to withdraw from the course and, since progression and retention rates from Level 5 to Level 6 tend to be higher, increasing progression from Level 4 to Level 5 should have knock-on benefits to overall student retention figures.

EILA2 was unfortunately of too small a scale to revisit the qualitative parts of the original project, but it is hoped these can be revisited at a future date.

Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings

This project is firmly located in the academic sphere of the conceptual model. It deals specifically with curriculum design and assessment, which are crucial to the student experience. The importance of student involvement in the design of assessment was recognised in the 2008 study, and so the student participation aspect of the conceptual model was explicitly addressed in the 2008 study, which devoted half of its content to the results of a series of interviews and focus groups with students.

The 2008 study qualitative research revealed that some of the students felt “exams are terrifying but I think they are necessary to keep the standard at a [high] level” and the type of assessment that most students preferred was the time-constrained type. Many of the outcomes of the qualitative work were matched by what the results showed – students tended to do better in TCAs but less well in formal examinations.

These qualitative data were used in conjunction with the statistical data (and the requirements of the professional bodies) to design the intervention, which was the focus on the EILA2 project.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

As was shown above, there was a marked difference in achievement between BME and White students in the four compulsory Level 4 LLB modules before the intervention (D+ to C). The University of Northampton has adopted an A-F marking scale, which is then converted to numerical values using a grading matrix (below).

Table 1: Marking scale A-F converted to numerical values

A+	25	24.0+	A+
A	23	22.0 – 23.99	A
A-	21	20.5 – 21.99	A-
B+	20	19.5 – 20.49	B+
B	19	18.5 – 19.49	B
B-	18	17.5 – 18.49	B-
C+	17	16.5 – 17.49	C+
C	16	15.5 – 16.49	C
C-	15	14.5 – 15.49	C-
D+	14	13.5 – 14.49	D+
D	13	12.5 – 13.49	D
D-	12	11.5 – 12.49	D-
F+	11	9.5 – 11.49	F+
F	8	6.0 – 9.49	F
F-	4	2.0 – 5.99	F-
G	0	0 – 1.99	G

In numerical terms, the D+ to C difference above was 14.44 (so only just under a C-) for BME students to 16.40 (marginally under a C+) for White students.

The main part of EILA2 was to look at the grades that LLB students on these four modules attained in 2008-09, 2009-10 and 2010-11 (i.e. the three years after the intervention was introduced) and assess the difference in overall performance between BME and White students.

The 2008 study report outlined some of the shortcomings in methodology of the original study, and EILA2 chose to follow the same, albeit imperfect, approach as it would be the safest and most reliable way to obtain comparable results.

Over the three academic years, the grades for 195 students in each of three pieces of assessment for four modules was taken, giving a sample size of over 2,300 assessment grades ($195 \times 3 \times 4 = 2,340$).

The results showed that across the board, the gap in achievement between BME and White students was reduced. In both 2008-09 and 2010-11, there was no statistical difference between the achievement of BME and White students. The 2009-10 results did show a difference, but even this was smaller than the difference prior to the intervention.

This is an encouraging set of results, and suggests that, on the small scale at least, assessment can be designed so that the attainment gap between BME and White students is reduced, and retention and progression are improved. A larger-scale, more longitudinal study would be able to assess the finer, more nuanced points of this intervention. Since the average grade for BME students had risen to a C, and the average grade for White students had remained at a C, the approach outlined above to reduce the gap without reducing grades was satisfied.

Further work in this area will be able to explore whether the measures put in place for LLB students at the University of Northampton work in the wider context – either in a cross-disciplinary sense or a cross-institutional sense (or both.)

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Related publications, resources and further information

Crofts, M. and Sneddon, S.T. (2009) *Equality in Legal Assessment: A Scoping Study*. Northampton: University of Northampton Office of Educational Partnerships and Lifelong Learning.

Section 3: Friendship and peer support

Section 3 focuses upon what is increasingly becoming an important aspect of university life within the UK, peer mentoring. The first paper from Robin Clark and Jane Andrews of Aston University provides a brief introduction into the findings of a large ‘What Works?’ project that evaluated peer mentoring in the UK. Based on the empirical research findings of the project, this paper proposes the ‘Transition+’ model of peer mentoring in which, within an ethos of mutual support, students help students succeed. The benefits of peer mentoring are outlined and recommendations for HEIs summarised.

Following the paper by Robin Clark and Jane Andrews, examples of peer mentoring from three case-study organisations evaluated in the ‘What Works?’ project are given. The first of these comes from Kim Davies at Bangor University who describes how Bangor’s ‘Peer Guiding’ programme constitutes a student-focused, opt-out mentoring system in which every individual new student is allocated to a mentor for the vital ‘transition’ period into university. The success of mentoring at Bangor is found in its inclusivity. Peer guiding is embedded with the schools and is part of the University culture. A different type of peer mentoring is discussed by Kathryn Axon of the University of Sheffield. Based on an ‘opt-in’ model, peer mentoring at the University of Sheffield provides peer support in over 40 academic departments. Concentrated initially on ‘transitional’ mentoring, Sheffield Mentors provide ongoing support and friendship for students into their first term and in some cases beyond. Each mentor is allocated one or two mentees (although in some cases this may be increased). The main advantage of mentoring at Sheffield is in the size of the programme – reaching across the University, mentoring is viewed positively by staff and students.

A third example of peer mentoring evaluated as part of the ‘What Works?’ project is discussed by Baljit Gill at Aston University, who describes a more long-term mentoring programme in which student mentees are carefully matched on a one-to-one ‘opt-in’ basis with a mentor. Based upon a student life cycle approach peer mentoring at Aston has been developed so as to offer bespoke high quality support for students throughout their academic careers. An institutional embedded and ‘self-reinforcing’ programme, one of the many benefits of mentoring at Aston is the fact that having been mentees in the first year, many second-year students volunteer to mentor new students.

Colin Bryson of Newcastle University provides insight into peer mentoring within Combined Honours. Part of a ‘holistic’ approach to student support, peer mentoring at Newcastle represents an excellent example of student engagement, one in which student mentors become empowered and student mentees gain high quality support.

The final example of peer mentoring comes from Paul Massiah at Coventry Business School. Focusing on international students, peer mentoring at Coventry Business School encourages collaborative learning while offering high levels of pastoral and social support. In this way the programme reduces isolation and in doing so promotes student success.

Peer mentoring in higher education: a reciprocal route to student success

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Keywords

- peer mentoring;
- peer support;
- reciprocity;
- student experience.

Nature of intervention

This paper provides an introduction to the findings of a large HEFCE/Paul Hamlyn-sponsored project, which aimed to investigate and analyse the value of peer mentoring in facilitating a successful transition into higher education.

Focus of intervention

Peer mentoring may be academic, social or professional in nature; or indeed, a mixture of these. It is generally aimed at enhancing the student experience.

Description of intervention

In considering ways to support students at transition, universities are not awash with money, consequently innovation is critical. By exploring the use of an institution's key asset, its own students, there is an opportunity for the creation of a true 'win-win-win' situation in which new students belong, existing students develop new skills and institutions experience minimal student attrition. Peer mentoring can provide such a 'win-win-win' situation. It offers an approach whereby students help students discover the new world of university life through the formation of safe and supportive peer relationships. The research upon which this brief paper is based provides evidence that peer mentoring works by offering universities a way forward in supporting their students at transition (Andrews and Clark, 2011). The study findings made clear that the introduction of a peer mentoring programme

needs to be well thought through and supported with student training and a level of ongoing care and maintenance. For a small investment, the benefits realised in relation to student success at transition are considerable. The institutions involved in this study believe that peer mentoring is a key component of the challenge to encourage student success at transition. The approach to peer mentoring briefly discussed here provides a useful tool that higher education institutions may adapt and adopt for their own purposes.

Figure 1 below shows the main components of the ‘Transition +’ approach to peer mentoring. This approach was developed out of the ‘What Works?’ peer mentoring project.

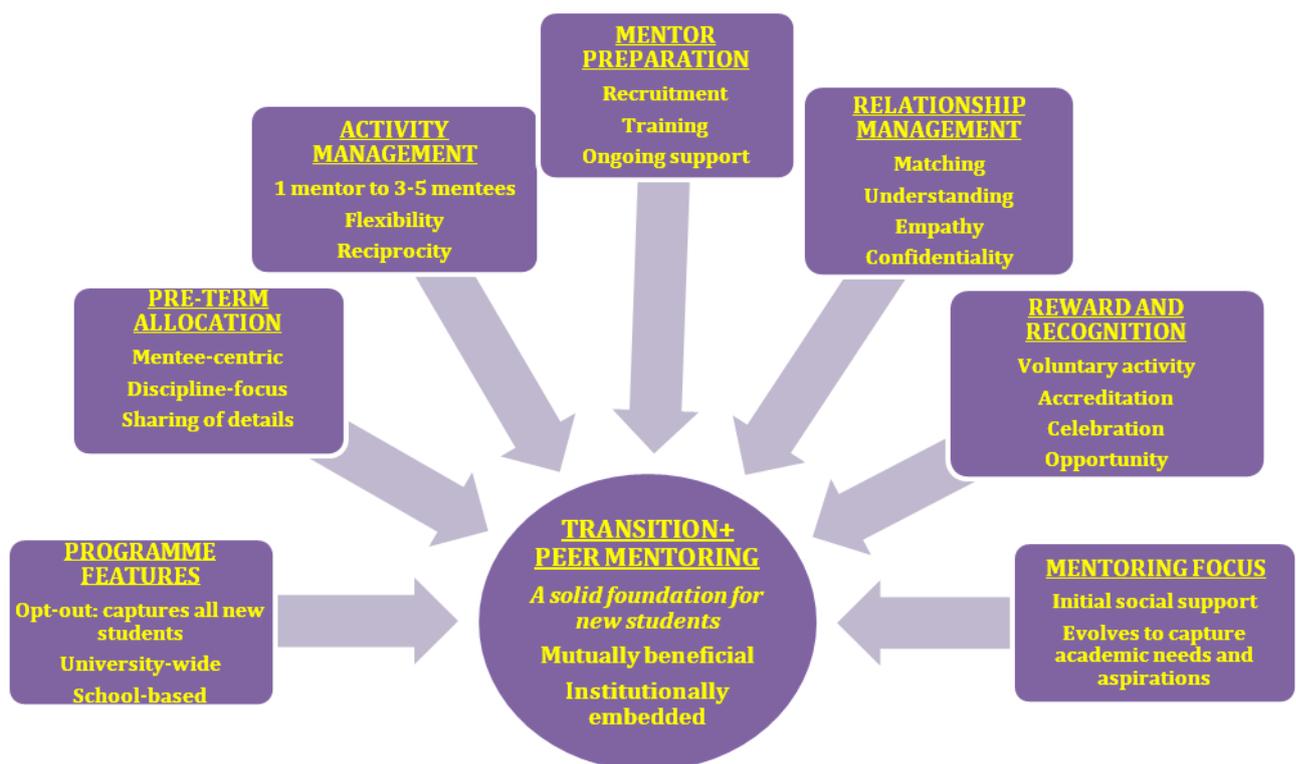


Figure 1: ‘Transition+’ peer mentoring: the features of an ‘ideal’ mentoring programme

How the intervention engages students

Peer mentoring works by engaging students in four different ways: (1) at transition; (2) by providing academic support; (3) by providing an efficient and effective way of providing ongoing support; (4) additionally, the unique benefits of peer mentoring for mentors means that it provides a unique method of engaging second- and final-year students.

Each of these is now discussed in turn:

1. **Peer mentoring at transition:** The first few days at University are vital in shaping students' university experience. University-wide transitional peer mentoring helps students make those vital first steps into higher education. It provides a 'safety net' that helps them make the transition from their previous life into university. By providing a 'catch-all' approach, this transitional peer mentoring is not viewed as a 'deficit model' of student support – instead it is embedded in institutional practice and as such represents a major strength where it is offered.
2. **Academic support and peer mentoring:** While transitional and longer-term pastoral peer mentoring are not about providing academic support, the study showed that peer mentoring relationships can provide the ideal forum whereby more experienced students can offer first-years generic academic support and guidance. Furthermore, in institutions where peer mentoring is offered on a school or faculty basis, peer mentoring can provide new students access to the tacit knowledge necessary to succeed at university.
3. **The role of peer mentoring in providing ongoing support:** Belonging and relationships are pivotal to success at university. In addition to providing new students with the means by which they quickly gain a sense of belonging, transitional peer mentoring can provide ongoing support to new students. Such support often lasts into the first term and beyond. Longer-term *opt-in* pastoral mentoring provides the ideal means by which students are able to build meaningful, supportive and reciprocal relationships. With regard to this type of peer mentoring, it is the concept of dual voluntarism that makes pastoral peer mentoring programmes a success.
4. **The unique benefits of peer mentoring for peer mentors:** While most of the benefits of peer mentoring are experienced by peer mentees and mentors alike, some benefits are experienced by peer mentors alone including enhanced employability skills and personal benefits. Participation in peer mentoring offers student peer mentors with the opportunity to gain first-hand experience in a responsible position. In doing so they gain valuable and transferable 'employability skills'.

[Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings](#)

In addressing both academic and social issues, peer mentoring fits with the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings. The study provided evidence that the value of peer mentoring in higher education is not just reflective of the support given to new students in the first few days and weeks of university. Instead it is indicative of the longer-term reciprocal relationships made between peers in which both benefit and both succeed.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

The study upon which this paper is based commenced with the hypothesis that “peer support impacts positively on students’ experiences by engendering a greater sense of belonging both socially and academically”.

The research approach involved a multiple case-study design in which pastoral peer mentoring and writing peer mentoring activities in six different HEIs were analysed utilising a mixed methodological approach. Primary research was conducted in three separate stages:

1. a pilot survey administered across all partner HEIs in 2009-10. This resulted in a response rate of 302 completed questionnaires (just under 10% of the sample);
2. a follow-on survey administered in 2010-11 at three of the partner institutions focusing on pastoral peer mentoring. This resulted in 374 completed questionnaires (just over 19% of the sample);
3. concurrently, in-depth qualitative interviews conducted at all institutions with a total of 97 student peer mentors and peer mentees. Of these 61 were involved in pastoral or transitional mentoring programmes (29 peer mentees and 36 peer mentors), and 36 were involved in writing peer mentoring (16 writing peer mentors and 20 peer mentees).

The quantitative data were coded and analysed using SPSS. The qualitative data were analysed following a grounded theory approach, in which the main themes and sub-themes were coded then analysed in some depth.

The full report, and other evidence, outlining the evidence of the value of peer mentoring can be found at: <http://www1.aston.ac.uk/eas/research/groups/eerg/current-projects/>.

Impact: recommendations for HEIs

One of the key aspects of the project discussed in this paper is that the recommendations made prioritise the student perspective. By *listening* to the student perspective, the two researchers were able to develop recommendations for higher education institutions, policy makers, students and for colleagues wishing to pursue further research in this area. It may be argued that of these, the recommendations for HEIs are most important. Thus they are summarised below:

1. Consider embedding peer mentoring as part of the institutional retention strategy.
2. Decide on the form of mentoring programme to be introduced.
3. Design a robust and well-managed programme.
4. Appoint a dedicated person, or persons, to manage the programme.
5. Ensure effective marketing of the programme.
6. Introduce a rigorous mentor selection and training process.

7. Take care in pairing mentees and mentors to ensure a good match.
8. Make clear the availability of ongoing support (if needed).
9. Evaluate the programme at an appropriate point or points in the year.
10. Consider academic credit/recognition for mentors.

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Peer guides: students supporting students through transition and beyond

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Keywords

- integration;
- orientation;
- reassurance;
- referral.

Nature of intervention

University-wide peer guiding: a centrally organised institution-wide scheme that offers transitional support and more to incoming 'freshers' in all academic schools.

Focus of intervention

The scheme aims primarily to enhance the student experience and operates within the social, academic and professional spheres, although more is undertaken within the social sphere than the others.

Description of the intervention

Bangor's peer guide scheme encompasses many elements beneficial to the transition process. It is not a formal mentoring scheme with one-to-one meetings, targets and reviews. Rather, it takes as its base the peer support that naturally arises within a student community and develops that into a hybrid that offers general befriending, orientation, information giving and social integration as well as elements of academic integration and of mentoring. Furthermore as an 'opt-out' scheme it has a broad coverage across the institution; all new undergraduates are allocated a peer guide unless they state otherwise.

The scheme is underpinned by a central structure that ensures a standardisation of processes such as recruitment, referencing and training, which are undertaken by a central co-ordinator based in Student Support Services. This ensures a highly visible and cohesive institution-wide scheme.

The practical implementation of the peer guiding programme is undertaken within the academic schools. This ensures it is sufficiently flexible to meet academic needs and also creates a sense of community without which it would be difficult to recruit the numbers required (each school is encouraged to recruit one peer guide to every five new students).

Although the nature of the role varies according to the needs of the individual school, peer guides typically:

- aid social integration: organise/attend a range of social activities;
- encourage participation in Students' Union activities;
- accompany to and/or help with induction sessions including Blackboard sessions, health and safety talks, library visits;
- help with information sessions, module selections and registration;
- lead orientation tours across the University and in Bangor itself.

Academic school co-ordinators allocate about five new students to each peer guide; where possible, in addition to being matched on the grounds of academic subject, students are matched with regard to demographic characteristics, e.g. mature students, Welsh speakers or international students.

In relation to international students, the work of the peer guides becomes more specialised. Attempts are made to establish contact prior to arrival in Bangor and new international students are greeted on arrival at their room in halls. Thus reassurance, information and social invitations are received quickly.

The peer guides maintain close contact with their group during and following the transition period. They organise small group, or even individual, meetings meaning that they are able to pick up problems as they arise. In cases where new students need additional support, the peer guiding role becomes one of empathy and reassurance, encouraging and facilitating access to the professional support services. Indeed, the speed and number of referrals to personal tutors, money support and counselling services is appreciated within the institution.

It is important to note that peer guiding is not just about the first few days or that vital transition period. Peer guides are expected to maintain a less demanding level of support for as long as needed. For many the contact will diminish quickly, but surveys regularly show many peer guides are still in touch with their new freshers at the end of the first semester. In addition to providing a mentoring service to new students, peer guides also help with open days – conducting tours, answering questions and giving a student's perspective of Bangor. For some that contact is the start of the peer guide cycle as the visitors remember those friendly faces and look out for them when they arrive as students.

The flexibility offered each year through the recruiting of a distinctive cohort of peer guides in each academic school is strengthened by the central underpinning structure. This results in a scheme that is highly effective and valued by staff and students alike (as depicted in the evaluations that have been conducted over the 17 years the scheme has run).

How the intervention engages students

The breadth of coverage across the institution is important. There are peer guides in every academic school so the support is easily available and offered to all new students.

One of the great strengths of the programme is the welcome at halls over the arrival weekend. Five hundred peer guides meet and greet 2,500 new arrivals; shepherding the freshers about, they encourage everyone to join in social activities while ensuring they arrive where they need to be on Monday morning. Quick social integration is often the key to academic integration and thus successful transition. The peer guides' contribution to this is highly effective with friendship groups forming before the official welcome and induction events start.

The immediate and sustained contact means that peer guides are ideally placed to build a supportive relationship. They offer reassurance and encourage the take up of professional support where needed. Significant numbers of first-years are advised by a peer guide to speak to staff: mostly personal tutors but also halls staff and, for more personal or serious issues, to student services staff. This encouragement to seek help is often key in solving issues quickly before they develop into more difficult problems.

Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings

Peer guiding fits within all spheres of the conceptual framework although its strongest affinity is with the social sphere. The framework notes that "friendship and peer support is critical to many students' decision to stay in higher education". This is particularly seen in the scheme's emphasis on facilitating peer networks and social activities from the point of arrival through the welcome period and beyond.

As the scheme is run through academic schools it is also part of the academic sphere. Most of the socialising and peer networking takes place with fellow students in the school and at times actually located in the school. Another facet linking it to the academic sphere is the peer guides' help with general induction sessions and processes. In addition some academic schools are piloting the use of peer guides to facilitate peer learning groups.

The central co-ordination of the scheme highlights its importance within the institution and facilitates good networking and visibility. Its actual location within Student Support Services roots scheme within the services sphere of the conceptual model. It is an ideal base from which to promote the referral aspects of peer guiding. An important part of peer guide

training identifies central services and how to access them easily, whether they are within the Student Support Services or other areas such as personal tutors and halls staff. Tours offered by peer guides often include other key services such as IT and library facilities. While the *Peer Guide Handbook* gives the volunteers' appropriate information to help them.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Although a lot of anecdotal evidence is gathered, for example from staff meetings and discussion activities at peer guide training, the scheme is also formally evaluated each year. This is done using an electronic survey, versions of which are sent to all first-year students, peer guides and all staff co-ordinators in the academic schools. The surveys provide a mixture of statistical data and individual free comments.

Key statistics from first-year respondents in 2011 showed:

- 85% had received general peer guide support with social integration, orientation and general induction activities;
- 79% rated that general help as good or very good;
- 71% had received support via small group or individual meetings;
- 62% had rated their individual peer guide as good or very good;
- 31% had been encouraged to seek help from staff;
- 45% had met peer guides at open day visits;
- 19% said the scheme had been important in their decision to choose Bangor.

In addition, 95% of peer guides thought it a positive experience. Also, while they were largely motivated to volunteer for altruistic reasons they did recognise the benefits to themselves in skills development: 78% cited increased communication and interpersonal skills and 75% increased leadership skills.

Of the open comments received on the surveys 71% were wholly positive with a high level of praise for the commitment of many individuals. This is reiterated in the comments received for the 'Peer Guide of the Year' nominations, from which the following quotes are taken:

My Peer Guide made sure I was comfortable from the moment my parents left.

He made us felt as if we fitted in with the students of the 2nd and 3rd years.

She was very helpful when asked questions and thorough with the personal advice given.

My Peer Guide helped people through all year and helped point us in the right direction whenever we needed her.

Sheffield Mentors: students supporting students

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Keywords

- peer support;
- technology;
- mentoring;
- cross-institutional support.

Nature of intervention

Peer support project working across academic departments at the University of Sheffield, administered by Student Services.

Focus of intervention

The intervention operates in the academic and social spheres and is aimed at enhancing the student experience and aiding retention.

Description of intervention

Sheffield Mentors is regarded as one of the largest peer mentoring schemes in the country. The scheme holds the Approved Provider Standard from the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation – the UK's national mentoring organisation. The scheme aims to support new students' transition into life at the University. It focuses on pastoral and transitional support for our new students. Mentors help their mentees with a variety of issues ranging from managing time and workloads; being responsible for finances and learning to adapt to shared living/living away from home for the first time. Sheffield Mentors is a university-wide project and operates in over 40 academic departments.

The project is managed centrally by the Student Services department with a co-ordinator nominated in each department to support recruitment, vetting of mentors and awareness of scheme. It is available to all incoming undergraduate students within those departments and

all mature students entering the University in any department. It is also now available for all care leavers and students who have been involved in the University's COMPACT scheme (an outreach scheme for local students).

The schemes' aims are to support the transition of students entering the University, reduce the likelihood of withdrawal in the first semester, enhance our students' sense of belonging and community and contribute to an enhanced overall package of student support in the University.

Sheffield Mentors has benefited from a fit-for-purpose online electronic hub resource to manage the whole process of the scheme, from application to selection. This online hub has been developed by CiCS (the University's corporate IT service) and is regarded highly by other colleagues across the sector, several of whom have been to view the hub in practice. The hub allows students to apply to become a mentor by filling in a simple application form. The applications are then passed to the co-ordinator for the relevant academic department for approval. The mentoring hub also allows students to select which training session they would like to attend and manage and modify their own mentor profile thus creating a feeling of ownership for our mentors.

The mentoring hub is also the portal for incoming students to apply for a mentor. The process is the same as those students applying to become a mentor, but allows students to use their applicant identity number to access the system. Upon application we are able to match mentors and mentees and the system automatically generates an email with relevant instructions to each party once a match has been made.

The online hub facility has made Sheffield Mentors a much more efficient and less time-intensive project on an already overstretched team within Student Services. Every student that is accepted to become a mentor attends an in-depth training session to equip them with relevant knowledge, skills and experience in the role of a mentor. Every mentor also receives a copy of the *Mentoring Guide* as a reference point for the throughout their role.

The role of a mentor is unpaid at Sheffield but students receive plenty of recognition for their contributions to the scheme. The majority of mentors use the experience as part of their Sheffield Graduate Award (a prestigious award recognising the value of extra-curricular activities and supported by many top employers) and throughout the academic year mentors are invited to share their feedback, attend careers/skills development sessions and one student each Summer will be employed as an intern within the wider team that manages Sheffield Mentors. This academic year also sees mentoring become a recognised activity for the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR).

Overall, Sheffield Mentors is a scheme that is popular among both students and staff at the University. The scheme operates centrally but works across academic departments. The scheme is successful at equipping students with skills and confidence to successfully carry

out their role as a peer mentor but also to take with them beyond University. Sheffield Mentors is an asset to the University of Sheffield and demonstrates effectively the strength in peer support and students supporting one another during times of transition.

How the intervention engages students

Sheffield Mentors is a largely self-promoting scheme. Many of our mentors were mentees themselves and as such have experienced first-hand the benefits of mentoring. The online hub facility makes it easy for students to get involved in the scheme and also to take ownership of the way they present themselves as mentors to their mentees. Sheffield Mentors is a responsive service and therefore reduces pressure on frontline services at peak time (e.g. Intro Week) as new students can approach their mentor for advice. This is also particularly helpful for alleviating stress on more vulnerable students as it enhances the often difficult transition from home to University.

Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings

Sheffield Mentors contributes heavily to a student's social sphere, which contributes to a student's overall sense of engagement and belonging. The mentoring scheme is successful at encouraging higher level students to share their experience of the University and student life to benefit new students entering the University.

The scheme is highly inclusive as students from less traditional backgrounds are actively encouraged and targeted to apply for mentor, e.g. mature students. Sheffield Mentors operates at points of key transition in the student lifestyle, but offers flexibility and student ownership for mentors and mentees to manage their relationship and conduct their meetings and activities in ways that suit them.

Sheffield Mentors strives for constant improvement and feedback from mentees and mentors is actively sought and acted upon.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

This academic year (2011-12) 681 new undergraduate students applied for one of our 492 mentors. Below is feedback from the January 2012 feedback surveys to mentors and mentees (at the time of writing the survey was still open for responses. Please contact the author for further information on the results of the survey). At the time of writing 90% of those that had completed the survey had enjoyed their role as a mentor and 93% felt confident in their roles.

The 2012 survey showed that:

- 92% of mentors survey felt they had made a positive contribution to their mentees' start at the University;

- 84% of mentors stated they become a mentor as they wanted to help another student;
- the majority of mentees would recommend having a student mentor to other new students.

Sheffield Mentors started in 2000 with a pilot project focusing on specific student groups. Student research at the time indicated that some students felt particularly vulnerable when starting at university and would benefit from having a peer mentor. The groups involved in the pilot were students who'd been identified as being an obvious minority group on their course. These were: mature students in Law; female students in Electronic and Electrical Engineering; female students in Mechanical Engineering; and Erasmus students (visiting exchange students) in Civil Engineering.

It was agreed that if the scheme proved to be successful then it would be extended to further departments. After relatively small growth over the first six years, from four groups of students to 12 full departments, from 2006 to the present the number of departments involved with scheme has dramatically increased. All but three of our academic departments are involved in the scheme and it is hoped that the School of Education will come on board for the academic year 2012-13 as they will have completed the first year of their new undergraduate degree programme. While the scheme does not operate in the Schools of Medicine and Dentistry (due to pre-existing successful peer mentoring schemes) the Sheffield Mentors team actively supports development in these departments. This current academic year has seen the development of a postgraduate research student buddy scheme piloted as a result of the organisers seeing the success of Sheffield Mentors.

The project is supported by the University of Sheffield Students' Union who are in full support of mentoring being available to new students in all departments; this also has the support of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching, Professor Paul White.

Website

<http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/mentoring>

Related publications, resources and further information

Available on request. Please contact the author.

Peer mentoring at Aston University: the student life cycle approach

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Keywords

- peer support;
- mentoring;
- transition;
- student life cycle.

Nature of intervention

Peer mentoring: students supporting students succeed.

Focus of intervention

Peer mentoring may be academic, social or professional in nature or a mixture of these. It is aimed at enhancing the student experience.

Description of intervention

Peer mentoring at Aston University is based on the concept that all students can benefit from the experiences of peers who are a step further along in their studies. This centrally managed programme offers support *for* students *by* students at critical points throughout their University career. It is strongly promoted as a *positive* support mechanism, rather than a deficit model for 'struggling' students, and participation in the programme is viewed as a way for students to take control of their learning, playing an active role in their own development. While aiming to provide additional support for students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds – for example, mature students, local students, students living off campus and those who are first generation HE students – the programme is inclusive to all students. Mentoring is offered on a voluntary, one-to-one basis whereby each mentor and mentee are encouraged to build a meaningful and trusting relationship. Its central co-ordination offers inbuilt flexibility to meet both the needs of a diverse student body and the demands of a broad range of degree programmes. Peer mentoring at Aston benefits enormously from

senior management support, firmly embedded within university culture, and included in the university Access Agreement.

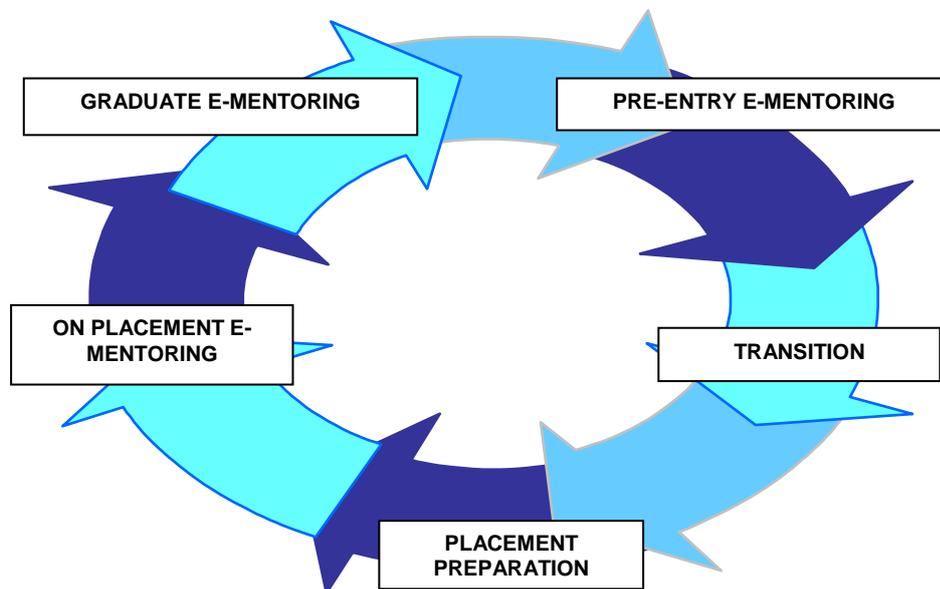


Figure 1: Aston University's student life cycle approach

Peer mentoring at Aston takes the student life cycle approach to its mentoring programme, to support transition at every point of the students' university career, thus supporting achievement, progression and retention throughout study at Aston.

New students are offered the opportunity of having pre-entry email contact with current students from the point their place at Aston has been confirmed. Pre-entry e-mentoring is offered via two strands, home students and international students, due to the distinct nature of support for students coming to study from another country. Home students are matched by degree programme while international students are offered the choice of a home student mentor or one from their home country. The majority elect to have an international e-mentor, then choosing a home student once they arrive. Support focuses on offering early information and guidance to facilitate successful transition. It enables the new student to develop an early sense of engagement with the University and reduces feelings of isolation and apprehension.

Once on campus the mentee is encouraged to participate in the face-to-face transition mentoring strand. Mentoring by second-years is focused on helping the new first-years to develop a sense of identity and belonging with the University, and get the most out of their first year, for example:

- making friends and getting involved with student societies;

- help in finding services on campus;
- dealing with the 'culture shock' of a new environment;
- tips on shopping and budgeting;
- finding out about transport and getting about;
- discovering things to do and local places of interest;
- achieving a good study/life balance;
- gaining a valuable insight into the second year.

The majority of Aston students undertake an industrial placement; in some disciplines this is a compulsory element of their programme, elsewhere it is not. Placement mentoring is focused on helping second-years make informed decisions about placement, and providing valuable tips about the placement year, for example:

- considering the benefits of the placement year;
- choosing the right placement;
- practical tips on applications, interview techniques, etc.;
- development of time management and interpersonal skills;
- examining career options;
- gaining an insight into final-year study.

Students on placement are also able to offer placement preparation for second-years and final-year students can offer e-mentoring support to those students on placement. This aims to combat the sense of isolation that may often be felt by students away on placement, particularly if they are working in an unfamiliar city or country, enhancing their continued sense of belonging to the institution. It also aims to support the transition of students into their final year upon completion of their placement.

Graduate e-mentoring supports the final transition – transition out of university. Recent graduates offer e-support to final-year students in their 'out-duction' from university. They may offer advice on careers, further study options, voluntary work, travel, in fact any aspect of leaving university.

Training is a compulsory element of the whole programme and a bespoke training programme has been developed. Uniquely at Aston both mentors and mentees are required to attend training; this significantly reduces any misconceptions or misunderstandings about either the programme, or the mentor/mentee roles and responsibilities. It also encourages mentees to subsequently become mentors as they already have a comprehensive understanding of the role. The training programme is supplemented throughout the year with additional workshops. These focus on developing the mentoring relationship, as well as exploring and utilising the skills developed through mentoring.

The programme's expansion over the last six years has been primarily directed by student consultation and feedback. Mentees and mentors are asked to complete both a pre- and post-mentoring questionnaire, which generates a wealth of useful data describing reasons for participation and benefits obtained. Participants are also invited to termly review meetings, where they meet in an informal environment. Although the prime aim is to obtain feedback on the progress of their mentoring relationship, it also encourages the students to develop a sense of community with other participants. As part of their responsibilities, students are required to complete a meeting record, giving an overview of their relationship. While details are not requested due to the confidential nature of the service, the information provides a valuable insight into frequency of meetings, and areas of discussion, through which trends may be identified.

This is a voluntary programme and therefore no payment is offered to mentors. However, their support and commitment is firmly recognised through inclusion of their participation on their student record, which can then be utilised for reference purposes. They receive an Aston Certificate to include in their portfolios and are invited to an end-of-year celebration to thank them for their commitment. During this event the mentee-nominated 'Mentor of the Year' award is presented.

Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings

Peer mentoring at Aston closely links to this conceptual model in its focus on student engagement throughout the student life cycle, from early engagement at pre-entry stage through to graduation and beyond. Students can access support from their peers at every point of their educational journey, and the type of mentoring support is targeted to their needs at that point of their study. The Aston model firmly reinforces the idea that transition happens throughout university, not just in the first year. This enhances students' social engagement and sense of belonging to the University.

How the intervention engages students

Recruitment activity to attract both mentors and mentees is undertaken via a range of media; posters, flyers, briefings, direct email contact. Specific briefings in schools are very effective, especially where the lecturer endorses the programme. Students can register electronically through MAP (My Aston Portal), by direct email to the co-ordinator, or face to face, throughout the year. Recruitment to the programme has been refined, with revised marketing materials incorporating the new Aston branding. This continues to provide the programme with a sense of professional and corporate identity.

An effective method of engaging students is to utilise the authentic voice of the students themselves. Case study posters are displayed around the University, and video films of student participants are accessible from the Peer Mentoring webpages (<http://www.aston.ac.uk/peermentoring>). These portray the students themselves talking

about the impact peer mentoring has had on their university experience. Furthermore the appointment of a dedicated peer mentoring officer ensures that students have a visible and accessible named contact on the programme.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Feedback and evaluation has been sought from participants since the inception of the peer mentoring programme, and year-on-year feedback has revealed key themes around impact. While the programmes were originally developed to provide support for the mentees, feedback indicates that mentors also benefit from participation in the programmes, in a variety of ways:

- improving communication and interpersonal skills;
- reinforcing study/work skills;
- developing leadership qualities;
- increasing confidence and motivation;
- enhancing CV;
- gaining recognition for skills and experience;
- satisfaction and personal growth.

Feedback from staff suggests student participation also has distinct impact for schools:

- reduces routine enquiries;
- more confident and motivated student population;
- cross-year collaboration;
- skills development (PDP);
- attractive to potential applicants;
- enhanced student employability;
- enhances the whole student experience and prepares students for their lives as graduates.

The programme is formally evaluated at the end of each academic year by asking students to complete an online survey. Results from the last survey 2010-11 indicate a very high level of satisfaction with the programme from both mentors and mentees. Students are asked to rate the impact on their mentoring relationship on a range of areas, which have been replicated in the Pathways to Success data. More general responses include:

Mentee responses:

- 92% indicated they had a positive mentoring experience;
- 96% would recommend the programme to their peers;
- 82% intended to become mentors the following year.

Mentor responses:

- 90% indicated they had found the mentoring experience enjoyable;
- 95% would recommend becoming a mentor to their peers;
- 81% felt they had made a positive contribution to their mentee's university experience.

Review meetings have provided a wealth of positive quotes from participants such as:

I think I benefited from the experience by taking time to and being able to reflect on my own experiences of the past couple of years at Aston and remind myself how far I've come from being a Fresher. (Transition Mentor)

The very first few weeks of my first term were really horrible. I felt that I would not be able to survive until the end of the term. I was really confused and pharmacy being such a demanding subject, really made me think I was not right for this course. This was until I signed up for this scheme and got my mentor. (Transition Mentee)

She was really nice to me from the start. She gave me advice and made me realise that everybody goes through this stage at the start. It was really good. I started to feel like I belonged. She went out of her way to help me, even at times I was too shy to ask! She didn't feel like a mentor but like a friend. And I know I will stay friends with her until the end. (Transition Mentee)

Website

<http://www.aston.ac.uk/peermentoring>

A holistic student engagement approach via partnership and peer mentoring in a research-intensive university

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Keywords

- holistic student engagement;
- partnership;
- peer mentoring.

Nature of intervention

A series of interventions made of part of a holistic student engagement strategy in the Combined Honours degree, and done through working in partnership with students.

Focus of intervention

The intervention is both academic and social and aimed at both enhancing the student experience and improving practice.

Description of intervention

Multi-disciplinary degrees present particular challenges to developing student engagement, a sense of community and belonging in the student within the educational setting. Although the student may be able to study the subjects and modules that offer interest, the point that they are navigating a solo path through their degree is isolating and disengaging with poor development of 'student' identity. This was very apparent from internal and NSS surveys before this intervention began in 2008. This project was designed to enhance transitions specifically for the 400 students undertaking the Combined Honours programme at a large research-intensive university.

The focus had to be extra-curricular as students did not share modules. The first step was to work directly with the students to identify what the problems were and to let them propose solutions. The primary mechanism for this was a student-led representative system. Some immediate responses such as changing the name of the degree and refurbishing the common room to their design were made. The students proposed having a peer mentor

scheme. This has grown in scope as it has become embedded. As well as comprehensive coverage of the first year, with a focus on transition into HE, mentor leaders have been introduced. Final-year students mentor second-years; graduates mentor final-year students and provide peer-assisted study support. The Student Staff Committee (SSC) officers are students rather than staff and rather than be a forum for complaint, the SSC is highly proactive and strategic. They have co-designed three modules and engaged with high level policies and the politics of the University. Responsibility for social dimensions in the degree has been entirely handed over the Combined Honours Society, who have developed from a handful of final-year students into one of the largest societies in the University. In addition to these three pillars there are other mechanisms to reinforce community and identity such as enhanced induction, student awards, a student magazine, student-led induction (for all years) and specific local events to enhance career prospects and graduate attributes. This model of student as change agent is similar to one developed at the University of Exeter (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011). In this example, students go out and gather evidence to support the case for change, but then implement it themselves either directly or through advocacy.

One advantage is that the department is a small, independent staff unit; this arguably has made it easier to be coherent and consistent in support of the strategy.

How the intervention engages students

Student partnership and empowerment has been a key goal (McCulloch, 2009). The most powerful mechanism has been a comprehensive peer mentoring system – this is a substantial role in itself, but the mentors have become the conduit of two-way communication (dialogue) and consultation. Mentors supplement the roles of the student representatives, and together both reach all the students. In addition these ‘super-engaged’ students act as role models to the other students and as ambassadors for the degree, at internal and external events. The students have become the champions of change and been remarkably successful at reaching and drawing in a very large proportion of the wider student cohort. This has raised student engagement and created a real sense of identity and community (Perry, 1999; Mann, 2001). Students genuinely feel part of, and ‘own’ their degree – and experience. Consequently, involvement and satisfaction is higher. Retention has improved, with clear examples of students staying who would have left (as the mentors are able to identify and address their concerns by referring on). Degree attainment and graduate outcomes have also improved. The ‘super-engaged’ do particularly well in both degree and graduate outcomes, perhaps not least because the modules they have been so involved in designing and reviewing, are very much about enhancing their academic skills, self-efficacy and ‘graduateness’ (Kuh, 2008).

Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings

This example puts into practice the ideas of Bryson and others about the salience of fostering student engagement (Bryson and Hand, 2007; Bryson and Hardy, 2011). It is also informed by the work of RAISE. As this intervention was very much about adopting a holistic student engagement strategy, it fits well with the conceptual model. The student has been placed at the centre, and responsibility is shared between staff and students for virtually all aspects of the educational experience. Thus they become highly involved in the academic sphere through participation in curriculum design and delivery and in the strategic management and future directions of the degree. This has built strong trust relationships and a dialogue of mutual understanding. However, the social sphere is possibly even more crucial, and there has been an emphasis on creating more opportunities for activity – encouraging students to engage in very wide range of on-campus and external roles. The mentoring scheme bridges both spheres, but all the students who have taken on roles (often more than one) have become leaders in the partnership, which has permitted us to engage students so much more in both the academic and social spheres.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

There exists a great volume of evaluation evidence (annual surveys of all the students, NSS, mentor evaluations, focus groups, minutes of meetings). Indeed, evidence is still being collected.

Some selected points of the evidence thus far:

The NSS

Overall satisfaction – 73% in 2008, up 23% in 3 years to 96% in 2011.

This is now top of the country in Combined programmes:

The Combined Studies Centre has proven to be a great support both academically and personally. They also strive to create a combined community, which is necessary as it is all too easy to feel alienated on the course. ... the Combined department are passionate about improving students' experiences.

Lots of opportunity to get involved with the course itself and develop skills and confidence through these extra activities.

The Last Chance week in Combined Honours is a really good idea for offering a bit more guidance about opportunities after graduation.

University internal annual online surveys

The response rate for the internal survey improved between 2009 and 2011 from 60 to 85%.

The following statistics relate to Stage 1 students:

- In 2009, 65% had contacted their mentor for advice at least once. In 2011 this was 91%.
- In 2009, 84% found the mentor scheme helpful. In 2011 this was 97%.
- In 2009, 42% had not found being in a mentor group at all useful. In 2011 this was down to 7%.
- In 2009, 26% of students felt they had no one to talk to on most of the modules. By 2011 this was down to 6%.
- In 2009, 16% felt part of the Combined Honours community. By 2011 this had increased to 29%.

Free text quotes included:

Fantastic idea, really helped me settle in quickly, get involved with CH and make friends doing similar subjects. It has been the most useful element of settling into uni, I would recommend continuing this.

So glad we had a mentor especially since I live at home because it seems harder to meet people.

I can now say I am thoroughly enjoying my final year as a CH student mainly due to the sense of community and wide range of opportunities Combined offers. I am proud to be a Combined student and being involved with the degree has made my University experience.

Love the Combined Honours department and think that the CH team do a great job to try and change things for the better and really care about what students want. The combined society is getting much better with a range of socials.

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Related publications, resources and further information

RAISE (Researching, Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement): <http://raise-network.ning.com/>

The effectiveness of peer mentoring intervention: the peer mentor programme for Strategy and Applied Management international students at Coventry Business School

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Keywords

- attainment;
- employability;
- international students;
- intervention;
- mentoring.

Nature of intervention

Peer mentoring of international students.

Focus of intervention

Peer mentoring at Coventry Business School is social and academic in nature.

Description of intervention

Mentoring defined by Burlew (1991, p. 214) as “anyone who provides guidance, support, knowledge and opportunities for whatever period the mentor and protégé deem necessary” has a steep history within industry. In higher education it has much potential to support and better inform students. Additionally, mentoring can encourage and motivate students during the ‘vulnerable’ early period of socialising at university; supporting them at a time when they are becoming familiar with their new study and living environments.

Mentoring is a close relationship between a mentor and protégé that includes support and guidance. Subsequently peer mentoring may also aid and improve student satisfaction and retention (Rowley, 2003). Further evidence supporting the use of mentors to improve

student satisfaction, particularly with regard to international students is cited by Lassegard (2008).

The objective of the peer mentoring intervention outlined in this paper is to promote peer mentoring, and to explore the impact that successful participation in a well-designed peer mentoring programme can have on socialisation, degree classification, subsequent study and graduate employment for international students. The approach draws on inquiry-based learning principles. During their respective course induction, students are asked to complete a 'mentoring' focused questionnaire. This allows their respective strengths and weaknesses to be identified – following which the information is used to match them with appropriate mentor. The same questionnaire is also completed at the end of the semester to evaluate any changes in their mentoring needs.

This approach was been piloted with undergraduate Level 1 students at Coventry Business School during 2010 with a January entry cohort of international students. Feedback from student mentees and peer mentors has thus far been positive, suggesting that it would be advantageous to complete a further study with the January 2012 entry courses, where the recruitment intake is entirely from international students.

How the intervention engages students and improves student success

Peer mentoring of international students has the potential to increase student competencies and skills by encouraging collaborative learning between student mentors and mentees. In doing so it engages students while positively enhancing the student experience and ultimately increasing student success.

Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings

At Coventry Business School the peer mentoring interventions capture the social and academic spheres of the 'What Works?' programme. While the social sphere focuses on activities that are not explicitly educationally orientated, those activities that focus on friendship and support are critical to many students willingness to continue with higher education. The intervention is an opportunity to reduce the risk of international students feeling isolated through the use of social networking before arrival, and the matching of peer mentor to mentee at an early stage of the student's higher education experience.

This intervention primarily focuses upon facilitating the opportunity for first-year Business School students to engage effectively. In doing so it crosses the academic sphere of the conceptual model, giving international students the opportunity to develop knowledge, confidence and identity to support academic achievement.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

During 2010, a pilot comparative study consisting of 32 international students of which 15 were from China, 11 from Africa and six from India, measured the effectiveness of peer mentoring within Coventry Business School's January entry cohort. Findings from this provisional study have highlighted a need for future research to increase the use of peer mentoring.

As part of the provisional study, a group of students who had enrolled on to the January entry courses were given the opportunity to take part in the pilot. Students who volunteered for the pilot were asked to complete a personal strengths and weaknesses analysis, which was then discussed with each participant. Students were then matched with more experienced final-year students who were studying for the same qualification.

In comparison to students who did not participate on the mentor programme, it was found at the end of the semester that students who had a peer mentor were more satisfied and achieved higher grades than those who did not.

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Section 4: Participation and belonging

Building on the theme of peer mentoring discussed in Section 3, Section 4 looks at different interventions aimed at promoting student participation and belonging. The first paper in this section, submitted by Kathryn Axon at the University of Sheffield, provides an overview of an intervention in which tailored support is offered for students returning to study after a period of absence. Utilising the services of a student intern, the Leave of Absence (LOA) project provides a peer-focused service to students returning to university following what is often a traumatic period of absence. By identifying and addressing individual student needs, the project promotes student engagement through reintegration. In doing so it reduces the likelihood of withdrawal and so enhances student success.

The second paper by Ian Scott *et al.* at the University of Worcester describes how a series of lunchtime staff/student engagement seminars have successfully promoted student engagement by providing a time and space whereby staff and students could interact socially while discussing academic interests and issues. One of the many positive outcomes of the seminars was an increased sense of belonging among the students. Furthermore, building on the success of the seminars, the University has now introduced a new academic tutoring system.

A blended approach to learning support is discussed by Karen Fitzgibbon of the University of Glamorgan. Deliberately focused on increasing student retention, three elements of learning support (organisation, delivery and type of advising) are brought together in a purposefully developed framework that represents a holistic approach to learner support. The approach has been used to improve student retention activities across the University and in doing so has enhanced and enriched the student experience.

The final paper in this section comes from Tracey Holker at Coventry Business School. Aimed at helping students develop their employability credentials, the intervention raises students' awareness of the concept of self-efficacy. This, in turn, impacts positively on students' motivation and encourages independent learning.

Welcoming students back from a leave of absence

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Keywords

- support;
- signposting;
- reintegration;
- transition.

Nature of intervention

Tailored support to students returning to the University after a period of leave of absence.

Focus of intervention

The intervention operates in the academic and social spheres and is aimed at enhancing the student experience.

Description of intervention

Students who take a break from their studies are contacted by the University in order for them to return to study. Generally students will receive up to two contacts from the University. The first being a letter sent from Registry Services detailing the steps they are required to take to recommence studies at the University. The second is contact from the student's academic department. This contact varies between departments.

The Student Services department recognise that on some occasions (particularly those where students had taken a leave of absence as a result of demanding/challenging circumstances, i.e. family bereavement, mental ill health, financial pressures) students may not be fully prepared for their return to study or provided easily with all of the options available to them.

The Leave of Absence (LOA) project offers peer contact from current students, explaining what students need to do to return to study and what related services they may require. The project contributes to an increase in students returning to study fully prepared, more confident to achieve and with less likelihood of drop-out or taking a further leave of absence.

The Student Services department recruits a student intern to contact students due to return from a leave of absence. The intern works during August prior to a student returning for the September semester. The process is also followed in the following January for those students due to return for the second semester of an academic year.

The intern is trained in the relevant support services involved in the reintegration of students to University. Services involved in the training include:

- Student Support and Guidance;
- the University Health Service;
- the Disability and Dyslexia Service;
- the Financial Support Team;
- the Student Advice Team;
- the Careers Service;
- Taught Programmes Office;
- Registry Services.

How the intervention engages students

Students often feel anxious about their impending return to study from a leave of absence, indeed many become disengaged from the University while on their leave of absence. The personal contact the project offers helps to put students at ease and set them on the right path to returning as it signposts and offers advice and guidance about a range of practical matters. For those students with more complex worries and concerns the project is able to put them in touch with more formal support structures.

The LOA project operates a follow-up phase following each re-entry to study to see how students are getting on following their return to study. This added contact helps students feel at ease and operates as a point of contact for more students who, as a result of leave of absence, are more vulnerable to withdrawing.

The personal contact the project provides gives students returning from a leave of absence a contact point in the University, which encourages them to access help and support once they have returned to their studies and thus reduces the likelihood of the student struggling with problems/support needs in isolation.

[Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings](#)

The LOA project at the University of Sheffield seeks to create a joined-up approach across professional services in the institution. The project is relevant to students on a leave of absence who often require more support and structure ahead of their return to study. The project also involves academic departments and works with them to successfully reintegrate students back to study and where relevant, provide robust support.

The LOA project allows students to continue on their programme of study. The contact of the project is central to the students' transition back to the academic sphere. By informing academic departments of those students due to return to studying from a leave of absence, tutors and other academic colleagues can reach out to returners and ensure they are ready, academically, to return to study.

Taking a leave of absence can quite often have a significant effect on a student's social network. When a student returns the peers they were studying with before will be on the next level of study and in some cases may be on placement or a year abroad, or indeed have graduated. It is important that students returning to study are made to feel at ease about the change in their social spheres and are equipped with relevant information to enhance their social lives during the re-transition phase. In-depth information about Students' Union and other extra-curricular opportunities are brought to the attention of students, and also the projects strength in linking with academic departments helps to ensure students do not feel isolated in classes with new peers upon their return.

Furthermore, as the LOA project continues to develop there is scope to enhance the project further. Developments in tailoring support for returning students are being looked into and contact throughout a student's leave of absence is also being considered.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Year on year the LOA project will reach approximately 300-400 students on a leave of absence and due to return to a September semester. For a second semester return approximately 100 students will be contacted.

While it is difficult to quantitatively monitor the effectiveness of the project, qualitatively and anecdotally the project is successful and well respected among students and staff. The following quotes represent typical feedback:

With regards to my return to study, things are fine. A few minor hiccups with lost paperwork, but all rectified. I'm well underway to complete my degree, and have no problems so far. I appreciate the university's concern, but I'm just fine. (Geography student)

Thank you for your concern. I have just settled down and I am doing fine with my studies. If I need any information on support services, I will contact my personal tutor or the SSID.
(Biomedical Science student)

These comments from students reflect the impact the project has in equipping students with the knowledge of support available to them at the University and also demonstrate the effectiveness of the project in leading to a student's success of completing their degrees. Comments from academic departments both support the project and indeed highlight the need for the project:

The Department has not contacted him, and greatly appreciates the service provided by your project. (Automatic Control Systems and Engineering)

Thanks for this. The students do appreciate the extra contact they receive.
(Department of Psychology)

There are plans to expand the reach of the LOA project to look at integrating students perhaps transferring to the University of Sheffield to complete their degrees following leave of absence from other institutions and also to evaluate the impact of the project in reducing the likelihood of these students withdrawing.

Ultimately the LOA project demonstrates the need to remain part of a student's life even when they are not in a period of formal study. Quality contact for the return to study is central to a student's well-being and capacity to engage fully at university and with student life.

An evaluation of a programme of lunchtime staff/student engagement seminars in two discipline areas: was it worth it?

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Keywords

- retention;
- engagement;
- cost-benefit evaluation;
- integration.

Nature of intervention

Within the Biology and Psychology departments interventions took place to enhance the academic and social environment.

Focus of intervention

The focus of the intervention was academic and social; the intention was to increase opportunities for students and academics to meet each other in a convivial environment.

Description of intervention

This paper describes how by building on and evaluating the applicability of an approach originally described by Fowler and Zimitat (2008) student retention is enhanced. Fowler and Zimitat's intervention, based in an Australian university, provided both academic and social activities where students and academic staff could interact with each other outside of the classroom. Their work was informed by that of Tinto (1998), which suggested that the formation of learning communities had academic and social benefits that positively influenced student achievement and persistence. The essential ingredient to the intervention was it provided time and space where students and staff could interact socially, but also a place where topics of academic interest could be raised and discussed.

The intervention took place within a single university in the UK. The University is small, but rapidly growing, with approximately 8,500 FTE students. The University has a strong

commitment to widening participation and consistently reports values for first-year continuation that are $\pm 1\%$ of the benchmark figure for the University determined by HEFCE (approx 10%). Students from two subject areas took part in the study: the first based in the University's Institute of Health and Society and the other in its Institute of Science and the Environment.

Students who joined the participating subject areas in 2009 were invited to attend six lunchtime sessions during the first academic semester. Each session lasted between one and two hours. There were different sessions for students from each of the subjects. In total 68 students attended the sessions: 66% of whom were females; 31% were classed as mature (older than 21); and 12% had declared that they were disabled. The programme was intended to provide students with the opportunity to socialise with lecturers and their peers in a semi-structured environment, while introducing them to their academic discipline in an interactive and imaginative way. Lunchtime activities included food and refreshments (free), subject-relevant film clips, student-led discussion, career planning, study skills and assignment help. The sessions were led by programme leaders, course tutors, and advisory staff and student mentors. All tutoring staff from the subject were also invited to attend. There was no compulsion on either staff or students to attend.

How the intervention engages students

The intervention was designed to increase retention by:

1. aiding the formation of student social groups, providing an informal setting for students to meet academic staff;
2. opening up discussions related to the students' academic disciplines.

Link to 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings

The approach cuts across many of the areas depicted within 'What Works?' conceptual model. It seeks to increase students' capacity and students' engagement and belonging. Indeed, the intervention was designed to produce outcomes that align with those of the 'What Works?' project in that it sought to: nurture supportive peer relations; develop positive interaction between staff and students outside the classroom; develop students' confidence as learners; and engender a sense of entitlement and belonging in HE. The intervention was not entirely inclusive, in that clearly some students could not attend because of unavoidable care commitments. Additionally it required a level of prior engagement that was sufficient to bring students to the lunchtime sessions; consequently it did not reach those students that had disengaged before the programme commenced.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Focus groups and anonymous questionnaires were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data of undergraduate perceptions of: their social and academic integration into university life; their propensity to stay at university; and, the value of the lunchtime support sessions. University data relating to retention were also analysed. The questionnaire design was developed out of the key findings of a literature review into undergraduate attrition in the United Kingdom.

Withdrawal rates

Overall the first-year withdrawal rate showed little difference than in previous years (approximately 12% across the programmes). The change between years in the withdrawal rates are not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 4.4$ df = 2 $P > 0.05$). During the three-year period the numbers of students studying the subject rose by 38% for subject A and 36% in subject B.

Questionnaires

The opportunity to complete the questionnaire was given to students irrespective of whether or not they attended. In total 200 questionnaires were issued and 151 returned. Of these 67 were from those students who attended the lunchtime sessions. The results indicate that attendees were more likely than non-attendees to be confident to speak to a lecturer and more likely to successfully complete assignments; additionally attendees were more integrated into the academic environment than non-attendees. Paradoxically, however, attendees were less likely to be recognised by a member of the course team.

47% of attendees agreed that the lunchtime sessions helped them integrate socially to university life. Meeting other students and receiving help with assignments were the most important reasons student attended, while help with study skills was the least likely reason. Reasons for non-attendance were that the sessions were held on the wrong day (36%), or engagement with sporting or other recreational activities (15%). Other reasons included part-time working and lack of childcare (12%).

Focus groups

As with the questionnaire we invited both attendees and non-attendees to the focus groups. The focus-group participants tended to put a high value on the lunchtime sessions. These two quotes given below describe the impact on two of the participants:

In class I go with the people I sit with, yeah, I will sit this side and then we will form a group and just stick with that and any group session we just remain as a group. You know you have some people who you know aren't very sociable and it is tough for them to find themselves in

a group, or to find a group to join and then, you know, you find them lagging behind ... the lunch time sessions were attended by different people so you met new friends.

[The lunchtime sessions] were fab ... I mean it was almost like a lifesaver for me, yeah honestly, it was such ... I couldn't praise it enough it was such a positive thing because I didn't really know many people and when you are in a big lecture, you know there is 160 of you and it does take a lot to walk along and go 'Hi, Hi, Hi' and I am sure people thought I was mad for the first month because I would just go along going 'Hi, Hi' and they were like 'ok' ... [The lunchtime session] was much smaller and more relaxed and you get to see your tutor as an individual and as you say a more relaxed way, you feel more confident I think asking things in a smaller group.

Costs

On average three members of staff attended each lunchtime session for approximately one hour, for a series of six sessions; this gave a cost of £512 (hourly rate of £28.45). Including indirect costs and the cost of lunches gives a total of £1,495 for a series of six lunchtime sessions.

At the time of writing, if a student withdraws having completed just half their programme, an English university will lose approximately £1,975 in grant income (lowest price band) and £1,645 in fee income (HEFCE, 2010). Adding in recruitment cost, assuming the lost student is replaced by extra recruitment the following year then the total income lost for just one student is £3,920.

The results from the intervention were not as equivocal as we had anticipated; in particular, there was no obvious impact on the overall retention rate of the programmes involved. It is also apparent, however, that for some students the lunchtime events were of significant benefit. Given the backdrop of increasing student numbers, our tentative conclusion is that such activities are worthwhile and likely to be cost-effective.

Subsequently, one of the departments involved has worked to integrate the intervention into their general curriculum. The study has also influenced the formulation of the University's new academic tutoring system, which has a greater emphasis on proactive academic engagement.

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Establishing a framework within which student learning support can be established, developed and reviewed

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Keywords

- learning support;
- advising type;
- delivery method.

Nature of intervention

Student retention activity in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Focus of intervention

The intervention is professional in nature and is aimed at improving practice, which in turn impacts positively on the student experience.

Description of intervention

Student learning support can often develop in a piecemeal manner, with initiatives being introduced at an institutional, faculty, departmental, course or module level. It can be problematic to view these multiple initiatives in a way that enables institutions to identify the balance of reactive and proactive services and how those services are delivered to students. As part of the author's work involving student-facing retention interventions at the University of Glamorgan, a framework was developed that enables such an overview to be achieved.

The framework is designed to take account of the three elements of learning support:

1. The organisational model i.e whether services are centralised, decentralised, or a hybrid model.
2. The method of delivering learning support, i.e. face-to-face meetings with advisers, online resources and support, email or telephone advice.

3. The type of advising employed based on Crookston's (1972) 'Intrusive, Prescriptive, and Developmental' typology:
 - 'Intrusive advising' is the term used by Crookston to describe initiatives that do not require the student to make a direct request for help. An example might be contact made by an adviser after reviewing a student's attendance pattern.
 - 'Prescriptive advising' is used where a student is directed to take specific action.
 - 'Developmental advising' is used to enable the student to understand how they have worked through a concern such that the next time a problem occurs they are equipped to deal with it without recourse to an adviser.

While retention interventions often focus on one of these three elements of learner support, the framework described in this case study demonstrates the strength of viewing interventions through a three-way lens, thus offering a holistic picture of organisational model, delivery methods and types of advising in use. Employing the framework to view the extent of learner support encourages reflection on whether there is an apparent over-reliance on one delivery method or one type of advising, or if there is a balanced set of delivery methods and advising types in use.

The strength of using a blend of the three elements of student learning support (organisation, delivery and type of advising) is that the focus is on the output from the provision – advisers and managers can identify where potential gaps in advice provision exist. For example, when considering the type of advising, it is possible to see whether interventions rely on students making an overt request for help (employing a prescriptive or developmental approach) or whether silence on the part of the student invokes support (an intrusive approach). By considering this balance in light of institutional student characteristics it is possible to assess the effectiveness of the services provided for particular student cohorts.

Viewing provision as a blend of the three elements (organisational model, delivery method and type of advising) also provides a vehicle for reflecting on current learning support provision; for example, individual advisers wishing to review their own practice or groups of advisers reflecting on the provision for a faculty or department, or indeed senior managers reviewing the provision of student learning support throughout an institution could all use the framework. Complexity can be addressed by developing multiple frameworks to take account of specific advising needs of distinct groups of students. For example, a university that comprises several colleges, or includes provision for 14-19-year-olds, may choose to review distinct parts of the institution using a separate grid and then compile an overarching review by bringing the grids together in a composite.

How the intervention engages students

The framework in and of itself does not improve engagement, but in providing an overview of the learning support initiatives, it offers an opportunity to critically evaluate the balance and blend of delivery methods and types of advising in use. When contrasted with the needs of the institutional student body, it is an effective tool with which to consider the strategic direction of such initiatives.

Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings

This intervention fits with the professional services sphere of the 'What Works?' programme. In particular it addresses two of the four emergent findings:

- Students value having access to a range of *internal and external sources of support*, particularly when they are experiencing difficulties.
- The impact of *professional services* can be increased by working in partnership with academic programmes.

In relation to the first finding, the framework facilitates institutional understanding of the blend of services available to students thereby assisting the institution to make effective use of finite resources with the best possible blend of services to meet the needs of learners.

With regard to the second finding, it is apparent that the framework can easily accommodate any and all of the initiatives offered by institutions whether they are offered by corporate support departments or as part of academic programmes. In this way, the framework offers a holistic approach to the understanding of learner support services in higher education institutions.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

This framework was used as part of an extensive project to evaluate the effectiveness of faculty-based student support at the University of Glamorgan. While the framework itself is only an instrument, it can help identify how and where services are being offered to students. Used in conjunction with data from each of those services, the framework can offer a powerful tool through which to establish, develop and review learner support services.

Having used the framework to view the retention initiatives at Glamorgan, it was found that the majority of interventions have an aspect of developmental advising connected with them, and the methods of delivering advice show an equal balance between telephone, email and online methods, with face-to-face being the most common. Feedback from students on the learning support provision is very positive and indicates that the interventions and services are proving to be an effective means of supporting students who have experienced difficulties that are impacting on their studies. Improvements in student retention have also

been associated with many of the interventions; further indication that the blend of provision is working well.

Using a blended approach to learning support has been shown to meet the particular needs of the students at Glamorgan, but the framework can be used throughout the sector by institutions seeking to review the balance of their advisory services to determine whether that balance meets the needs of their students. In this way, the blended model shows the strength of considering the three elements of student learning support together, but offers institutions the flexibility of establishing such support in a way that recognises the contingent needs of individual institutions, faculties and departments.

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Supporting students to develop attitudes to learning that will strengthen their self-efficacy beliefs and employability credentials

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Keywords

- graduate employability;
- self-efficacy
- attitudes to learning;
- inquiry-based learning.

Nature of intervention

Activities to help students develop attitudes to learning that will strengthen their self-efficacy beliefs and employability credentials in the Department of Strategy and Applied Management at Coventry Business School.

Focus of intervention

Academic intervention aimed at enhancing the student experience and improving practice.

Description of intervention

Universities are increasingly focusing upon the employability credentials of their students. Yorke and Knight (2007, p. 158) suggest that employability should be considered in relation to the attributes of students in the following four areas: powers of understanding (evidenced by gaining a good degree); application of skills (generic and subject specific); metacognition (capacity for reflection); and efficacy beliefs (and what they describe as “other personal qualities”).

This intervention focuses specifically on the fourth element mentioned above – self-efficacy. Bandura (1995) describes self-efficacy as the “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations” (p. 2). Self-efficacy beliefs can influence factors such as motivation and commitment levels as well as an

individual's willingness to take on difficult tasks. Yorke and Knight's perspective on the personal qualities required by students is that students should have the confidence that they can "make a difference" (2007, p. 160). This, for example, could be typified by having an internal locus of control (Rotter, 1966) and a malleable (rather than fixed) self-theory (Yorke and Knight, 2004). In essence, students need to believe that by working hard they are able to improve their own abilities and potential outcomes.

The objective of the intervention outlined here is to make students aware of self-efficacy and the impact that their individual beliefs can have on their engagement, degree classification and ultimately their employability. The intervention has been piloted with students participating in a Level 2 Career Development module, which is mandatory for students on various Business programmes at Coventry Business School. There are typically around 250 students on the module, the primary aim of which is to improve their employment prospects.

The activity draws on inquiry-based learning principles. Participating students are asked to undertake a review of self-efficacy literature to appreciate for themselves the importance of helpful self-efficacy beliefs. The activity takes place over a two-week period as follows:

Week 1: Students are asked to complete a brief 'attitudes to learning' questionnaire in their seminar groups. (The questionnaire includes three self-efficacy-related statements and the students are asked to indicate the extent to which they agree with each statement on a 1 to 5 Likert rating scale.) The students are then introduced to the concept of self-efficacy and asked to undertake a review of self-efficacy-related academic literature. (They are given a briefing document containing a few key references as a starting point, but ultimately the onus is on them to find relevant articles.) The students are asked to work in groups with the aim of presenting their findings to the rest of the seminar group the following week.

Week 2: The students present their group's findings to the rest of the seminar class. The activity ends with the students being asked to complete the same questionnaire they had completed the previous week to gauge if there has been any change in their individual beliefs.

How the intervention engages students

It is likely that participating students will have little prior knowledge of the importance of self-efficacy and consequently, students with unhelpful self-efficacy beliefs are unlikely to be aware that they may have a 'problem.' Thus it is clearly important to make students aware of self-efficacy and the impact that their individual beliefs can have on their employment outcomes (as well as their degree classification). Moreover, if as a result of undertaking the research, the students learn the value of helpful self-efficacy beliefs, this should in turn lead

to better individual outcomes for them – i.e. they should develop an understanding of the importance of behaviours such as hard work, commitment and taking on difficult tasks.

[Link to the ‘What Works?’ conceptual model and findings](#)

This intervention primarily focuses upon developing the capacity of students to engage effectively and operates within the academic sphere of the conceptual model.

Assistance for students to develop helpful self-efficacy beliefs is especially relevant to graduates from post-1992 universities (who tend to be from lower social classes than those attending older universities) as research has suggested they do less well than graduates with more affluent backgrounds (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006). Similarly, Tomlinson (2007) found that even within older universities, students from poorer backgrounds appeared to have lower aspirations and so were more likely to ‘settle for less’.

The inquiry-based learning approach outlined above also avoids the inevitable lecturing at students typical of traditional teacher-centred approaches and instead very much meets the conceptual model’s requirement to move to a more learner-centred paradigm, i.e. this intervention enables students to find out for themselves the importance of self-efficacy beliefs and the impact that their own beliefs can have on their individual outcomes.

[Evidence of effectiveness/impact](#)

Feedback from staff and participating students has been positive, suggesting that this approach is useful in raising student awareness of self-efficacy. For example, some groups summarised their presentations in the second week of the activity by stressing the positive correlation between effort and achievement. Additionally, many of the students indicated that they very much enjoyed undertaking their self-efficacy research as they found it both interesting and enlightening.

In particular, the activity appeared to make students really think about what they needed to do to improve their own attitudes to learning as illustrated by the following quotes from participating students:

I feel I doubt myself more than I should. I feel with help I could learn to appreciate what I am good at more. I think I need help with motivating myself at tasks I find tedious.

I believe I doubt my capabilities and need to work on having a better self belief ... I need to concentrate on how to perform successfully and not dwell on every negative outcome – and not to give up so easily.

The benefits of the activity to less confident students in helping them improve their employability-related credentials was also acknowledged by the module leader, who commented as follows:

The self-efficacy activity has been very useful for emphasising several important messages to students. In particular it has been useful in encouraging the least confident students to take control of their own career development.

A sample of 31 of the completed 'before' and 'after' questionnaire responses was also analysed. These showed a very slight increase in the average total 'after' score compared to the total 'before' score; however, this was not statistically significant. This was perhaps as a result of students realising what 'good' students would be expected to think and hence providing similar answers in both weeks – particularly as they were asked to include their names on both the 'before' and 'after' questionnaires. (The questionnaire was designed mainly as a tool to encourage the students to engage with the concept of self-efficacy rather than as the basis for measuring any improvement in their scores.) Consequently, it is now planned to redesign the questionnaire to make it more suitable for statistical analysis – perhaps increasing the size of the rating scale and incorporating more questions to better measure the participants' underlying self-efficacy beliefs.

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Section 5: Using data to enhance the student experience

This section focuses on how institutions have used empirical research methods to enhance the student experience. The first paper from Deb Hearle and Nina Cogger of Cardiff University discusses student involvement in the redesign of the Occupational Therapy curriculum. By seeking the student perspective, staff in the School of Healthcare Studies have increased engagement while promoting a sense of empowerment and inclusion among the students.

The second paper in this section comes from Melanie King at the Centre for Engineering and Design Education at Loughborough University. Using learner analytics and targeted tutor intervention, an integrated system termed 'Co-Tutor' has been introduced. Co-Tutor provides the means by which staff are able to identify students who may be struggling with their studies and offer them individual pastoral care and academic support. Co-Tutor represents a flexible and highly efficient tool the use of which impacts student engagement, retention and achievement.

The evaluation of a programme aimed at enhanced employability and professional development is described by Fiona Wager of Edinburgh Napier University. The 'Towards a Confident Future' (TACF) project is aimed at students from a 'widening access' background, providing them with individual support and guidance. By focusing on employability, the TACF project increases student retention while offering students the opportunity to develop and hone crucial transferable skills within a work-focused environment.

The final paper in this Section discusses the effectiveness of formative assessment and feedback on learning. Research undertaken by Lucy Wheatley at Cardiff Metropolitan University, highlighted the importance of providing frequent opportunities for formative assessment and feedback. Using the data, staff at Cardiff Metropolitan University have developed a student-centred, outcome-driven approach to formative assessment that has been embedded into the curriculum. This approach promotes deep learning at an individual level while encouraging the further development of a learning culture at an institutional level.

Involving students in Occupational Therapy curriculum design: perceptions of staff and students

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Keywords

- student engagement;
- curriculum design;
- Occupational Therapy;
- action research.

Nature of intervention

Student and staff experiences of student involvement in curriculum design for a BSc (Hons) Occupational Therapy at Cardiff University.

Focus of intervention

The focus of this intervention is academic: aimed at both enhancing student experience and improving practice within education.

Description of intervention

Student involvement has always been an important part of informing curriculum design and delivery within the Department of Occupational Therapy in Cardiff University. The current curriculum integrates recommendations from student module and programme evaluations. Research by students within the department is also encouraged in areas such as evaluation of current provision and the needs of students. Studies have included establishing needs of part-time students, preparation for specialist placements, rewarding excellence in practice education and ways to facilitate the integration of health promotion in the curriculum.

Traditionally, around the time of revalidation, students are invited to take part in the curriculum design process, particularly at the level of structure and module design.

Anecdotal evidence from staff together with module and workshop evaluations suggested that student involvement has always been invaluable, but its impact had never been formally evaluated. In order to address this it was decided to investigate staff and student perceptions of the impact of student involvement in curriculum design in preparation for the forthcoming revalidation.

An action research project allowed the current activity within curriculum design to be developed (Hearle and Cogger, 2011). The study was predominantly qualitative in nature, although demographic data and initial opinions were recruited via closed questions. Action research was considered the most appropriate approach due to the ongoing nature of curriculum design within the department. It is widely used within education and enables researchers to analyse practice within the workplace, taking action to improve this and re-evaluating progress (McNiff and Whitehead, 2005).

For this evaluation two student-led groups reviewed the proposals following a short presentation outlining the newly proposed curriculum and a detailed look at the modules and structure. Immediately following this, the impact of student involvement was evaluated by students via an online survey. Issues explored included the perceived impact of students' contributions in relation to the nature and value of this exercise. Students' suggestions were summarised and forwarded to staff for their views. An online survey was then administered to staff, which required them to reflect on the value of the student contributions in relation to relevance and potential inclusion in the curriculum.

How the intervention engages students

During the evaluation, many of the comments from the students centred on issues of curriculum delivery and practicalities such as timetabling. This concurred with the findings of Bovill *et al.* (2011). By addressing issues around effective use of students' time when in university, the intervention encourages engagement in studies and in doing so promotes overall retention, especially for non-traditional students or those who are funding their own way through university; a point illustrated by the following quote:

I chose part time course in order to manage financially ... At the moment we have the same breaks as school ... If I have to come to university when my kids off school, I would have to find £80 a week on the top of university fees, child care during my placement and travel expenses. I won't be able to study then. I know that child care is an issue for many students in my group.

This evaluation was the first opportunity for undergraduate students within the Department to work together. This was valued by both groups as it enabled them to acknowledge and respect the differences in each of the current programmes and forge networks with other students.

Link to 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings

The important aspects of this approach relates to the academic sphere of the conceptual model. Within Cardiff University, student success is measured partly by academic results, but more so by the future employability of the students. Fostering collaborative relationships between staff and students through acknowledging and respecting the value of student contribution develops lasting and positive relationships both during the programme and beyond graduation. One student commented:

As a current student it is nice to be valued and know that your opinion is considered. Equally, if our comments are taken into account, fewer issues may arise in the future.

Additionally, the intervention links to the professional sphere of the conceptual model. Indeed, the relatively small size of the profession means that collaborative partnerships in the provision of placements and the development of an evidence base for practice is essential. A strong pool of past students as practice educators ensures that for occupational therapy, even when placements are difficult to secure, no student has ever been without a placement. During their studies, students not only willingly collaborate on research projects with staff, but some continue to publish and present findings at conferences collaboratively with staff and progress innovations commenced in University (see, for example, Morris *et al.*, 2011).

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Data collected were predominantly qualitative and were thematically analysed in order to identify student and staff perceptions. Quantitative data were used to contextualise the qualitative data.

Findings suggested that staff and students believed student involvement in curriculum design was invaluable and should continue be encouraged for the future. One key theme identified was the positive impact of involvement on the student. Reasons cited by students for volunteering to help in the study included their wish to influence the future curriculum and to experience research activity. Both issues were cited as subsequent benefits of involvement. Within the analysis, benefits for staff and curriculum were also identified.

Benefits indicated by both staff and students included that student involvement gave students a much greater understanding of the curriculum design process. Students commented that they had not been previously aware of the complexities involved. They also acknowledged the impact of the curriculum on future employment and employers, and it is expected that making this link will help students to see the value of engaging fully with their academic studies and the role of these in preparing them for practice. Comments included:

I can see the complexities of putting together a logical curriculum to suit the needs of the students at the right level.

... how organic the curriculum is in meeting the changing working environment in the real world.

Comments indicated altruistic beliefs of doing things to benefit others and were also a reminder of the value and importance of seeking views from a variety of perspectives.

I think it's a wonderful idea. Everyone had experience of the curriculum and had lots of ideas to make relevant change and know that my comments can help support future students.

The focus of staff comments was around creating a sense of engagement and empowerment for the student by being able to make a difference and feel valued.

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Website

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Co-Tutor: a relationship management system to enable staff to monitor students' engagement and provide support to 'at-risk' students

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Keywords

- monitoring engagement;
- institutional data;
- at-risk students;
- staff-student interaction.

Nature of intervention

Using learner analytics and targeted tutor intervention to support the retention and progression of students, enhancing the learner experience and building quality tutor/student relationships.

Focus of intervention

The intervention is academic and aimed at both enhancing the student experience and improving practice.

Description of intervention

Loughborough University has high rates of student satisfaction, retention and completion. This can be attributed at least in part to the relationships students build up with their tutors, supervisors and professional services staff. Pastoral care, effective attendance monitoring and timely advice and guidance from academic and support professionals, play a vital role in helping to build and support these relationships. The effective management of these processes across the institution is critical in delivering a consistent and high quality experience for all students.

The Centre for Engineering and Design Education – formerly the Engineering Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (engCETL) – has collaboratively developed a relationship management system, called Co-Tutor, to track student engagement in learning,

to identify 'at-risk' students and manage staff/student interaction, which is used across the University.

Co-Tutor is a student and staff relationship management system. It is used by academic staff and administrators to communicate with and manage students, including personal tutees, project students, industrial placement activities, postgraduate research supervision and course cohorts. Co-Tutor allows staff to undertake a range of functions in relation to specific groups of students or individuals, such as view students' personal information, attendance and course marks; organise groups, email groups and schedule meetings; and upload additional information and add comments. It automatically gives permission to staff access to student data based on their role within the department or institution. Thus, it enables staff to view a wide range of information to monitor students' attendance and progress, inform decision-making and organise interventions to improve student retention and progression for students who are identified as being at risk. For example, students with less than 50% attendance are automatically flagged to the tutor, and then the tutor can access other information about the student and decide how to act. Tutors log all their communications, comments and actions. This allows managers to be sure that all students are receiving suitable levels of pastoral care and academic support. In addition, this reinforces the personal responsibility members of staff have for supporting and guiding their students, and providing high quality information and advice.

In summary, Co-Tutor provides staff with a system that integrates institutional data and external sources of information in order to make better-informed decisions of 'at-risk' students and help the progression of all students. It supports a proactive interventionist approach so that an effective and supportive relationship between staff and students is built up.

How the intervention engages students

A recent study by the Centre for the JISC-funded Pedestal for Progression project (<http://progression.lboro.ac.uk>) involved using a service design approach to solicit the views and experiences from the current student body. From the vast collection of user experiences gathered during the discovery phase and knowledge of the existing data collected on students, potential solutions and areas for enhancing student progression were identified and arranged into the following themes:

1. Improving the capability to time manage – easy-access calendar (in relation to student experience as no conflicting demands of coursework/project deadlines).
2. Easy access to knowledgeable, better-briefed, personal tutors (who know students better) and other support staff.
3. More help with employability and support for progression beyond study.
4. Possible opportunities for students to have mentors in their final year.
5. Access to library resources.

6. Active staff – students being asked if they need more help, or to be reassured about progress, or to be contacted if seen to be struggling.

From this research, recommendations for new initiatives were made to various departments within the institution and in particular to development the Co-Tutor initiative.

Processes were designed with personal tutors to look at the current use of attendance data and how a mixture of new automated notices could be sent via email to students and the relevant member of staff to highlight non-attendance. Changes to the way the registers were set up allowed each session to be recorded as 'critical' or not and also allowed a reason for absence to be recorded so more specific emails could be sent to those students who were missing critical sessions only. It was also felt important that students could access their own attendance data and be proactive about seeing and addressing their own change in patterns of attendance.

[Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings](#)

Co-Tutor provides staff with information and data to assist them to monitor student engagement through attendance and performance, which is supported by other institutional data. If students have low levels of engagement this is flagged up, and staff can they take actions to proactively engage with students, particularly those at risk of withdrawing or underachieving. This supports the project findings that identifying programmes, modules, student groups and individual students at risk of withdrawing is a key role that institutions should undertake, and then take follow-up action. This facilitates staff capacity to identify 'at-risk' students and communicate and engage with them.

Co-Tutor was developed in Engineering, but the institution-wide adoption of Co-Tutor demonstrates the institutional commitment to student engagement and the development of relationships between staff and students. Furthermore, it encourages individual staff responsibility for the engagement and success of their students.

The generation of reports allows managers to monitor staff engagement, and thus promotes staff accountability. This may have a range of benefits that go beyond the scope of Co-Tutor, as staff see a direct relationship between their activities and the outcomes of the student cohorts they are responsible for.

[Evidence of effectiveness/impact](#)

By promoting staff responsibility and facilitating good communications and relationship building with students, it is believed that Co-Tutor has contributed to improving student attendance, engagement and success in higher education. Its impact is demonstrated by the changes in students' behaviour in relation to attendance, as a result of staff use of information and follow-up action.

Data from the past five years' attendance records suggest that the act of taking registers potentially has the effect of increasing attendance rates. The number of modules monitoring attendance has increased from 62 to 260, and the average attendance rate has increased to 66% to 70%.

The data also show a correlation between attendance averages and final degree classifications. 31% of people who achieved a first class degree attended teaching sessions more than 91% of the time, compared to 26% of people with an upper second, 11% of people with a lower second, and only 8% of people with a third. People graduating with a first and an upper second are most likely to attend more than 91% of the time, people with a lower second tend to attend between 71 and 80% of the time, and people with a third are most likely to attend between 61 and 70% of the time. In addition, the data demonstrate that students achieving a first class degree have consistently attended at a higher rate than other students. It also suggests that intervention by staff to increase student attendance can improve degree outcomes for students.

A survey of Co-Tutor staff users suggests five key reasons why Co-Tutor impacts on engagement, retention and achievement. In sum, Co-Tutor:

1. Provides flexibility and continuity to support a student's learning journey:
 - 86% (55/64) reported a positive effect on the continuity of care from a student's previous tutors; 6% (4/64) reported a dramatic improvement.
2. Helps the identification and monitoring of struggling students to aid retention and improve performance:
 - 89% (55/62) reported a positive effect on aiding intervention and early recognition of struggling students; 13% (8/62) reported a dramatic improvement.
3. Assists staff in their responsibilities and improves communication:
 - 85% (51/60) reported a positive effect on communication between various tutors and administrators; 10% (6/60) reported a dramatic improvement; 84% (47/56) agreed or strongly agreed it helps new members of staff in their tutoring roles.
4. Provides important metrics to help enhance the student experience:
 - 77% (41/53) either agreed or strongly agreed that it helped to provide consistent pastoral care and industrial supervision across the department.
5. Provides supportive and inclusive development process based on departmental and academic need:
 - 77% (20/26) agreed that the method of developers working closely with staff created a more useful, flexible and innovative system.

Website

<http://co-tutor.lboro.ac.uk/about.php>

Towards a Confident Future: enhancing employability for wider access students

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Keywords

- wider access;
- enhancing employability;
- employer mentoring.

Nature of intervention

The 'Towards a Confident Future' project is located within Student Development & Wellbeing, and is part of Student & Academic Services at Edinburgh Napier University.

It provides a range of employability-focused personal and professional development activities, including an Employer Mentoring Programme, to students from wider access backgrounds.

Focus of intervention

The focus of the intervention is predominantly professional and academic.

Description of intervention

The Towards a Confident Future (TACF) project aims to address ongoing disadvantage in the early employment and long-term career outcomes of Edinburgh Napier University students from wider access backgrounds. This project, funded by the Big Lottery for a three-year period, seeks to enhance the achievement and employment outcomes of students from wider access backgrounds through the provision of a range of employability-focused personal and professional development activities.

The programme is targeted at Scottish-domiciled students in the third or fourth year of an undergraduate programme who fit one or more of four eligibility criteria:

- direct entrant (i.e. entered university straight into second, third or fourth year from college);
- mature (25 years or over in the third year of an undergraduate programme);
- from most deprived 40% of postcode areas;
- first in the family to attend university (i.e. neither parent has attended higher education).

Employer mentoring is a key element of the project, and aims to match eligible students with a professional working in a relevant field of employment. Other core elements of the project include the provision of a range of employability-focused personal and professional development activities, including the Confident Futures workshop programme delivered both on an open and integrated basis, and a range of academic skills workshops. TACF aims to increase participation by the target group in existing personal and professional development activities, and also to develop new and innovative approaches to promoting and delivering personal and professional development activities to encourage and facilitate participation by the target group.

How the intervention engages students

The Towards a Confident Future project engages target group students through encouraging and supporting participation in a range of activities designed to improve employability and networking skills, with the overarching aim of improving student success in relation to graduate employment rates. For example, the Employer Mentoring Programme engages students through matching eligible individuals with a professional in a relevant field of employment. It aims to:

- improve the employability of Edinburgh Napier University students and encourage them to gain graduate-level employment;
- help students build confidence in applying for jobs and develop interview skills;
- give undergraduates an insight into a particular industry;
- offer a developmental opportunity to mentors;
- strengthen the University's links with graduate employers.

Although there are variations, the programme mainly runs from September to May. Mentors from a diverse range of relevant professions are recruited and trained, prior to being matched with student mentees who have also undertaken relevant training. There is a minimum requirement for four meetings during the mentoring period, and it is expected that each meeting will be at the mentor's place of work and should last around one hour. Mentors and mentees are supported by the Employer Mentoring Co-ordinator, who maintains regular contact and holds networking events during the year. A celebration event is held for mentors and mentees at the end of the year.

The programme is now in its third year. During the first two years, 151 mentors were trained, with 76 active mentors in year one, and 83 active mentors in year two. One hundred and sixty-three mentees were matched on the programme over the first two years, and there are currently around 85 mentees participating this year, each paired with a relevant mentor.

The Towards a Confident Future project also aims to improve student success by increasing participation by the target group in Edinburgh Napier University personal and professional development programmes, providing opportunities for the development of skills and attributes relevant to gaining graduate employment. The project is linked to the University's strategic priority for 2009-2015 of developing "confident, employable graduates". It is also associated with other university-wide initiatives including: 'Stand Out from the Crowd'; the Edinburgh Napier University Graduate Attributes Model; and, the Conscious Student Employability Model.

[Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings](#)

The Towards a Confident Future project is a predominantly professional initiative, although academic links are found within the way in which aspects of service provision are integrated into academic departments. It links with the 'What Works?' conceptual model by:

- 1. Engaging students across the life cycle/student capacity building:** The project focuses on students from wider access backgrounds in their third or fourth year of an undergraduate degree programme. It supports the development of skills and attributes of core importance for graduate employability. It engages students in higher education beyond the transition period identified in the conceptual model.
- 2. Working in collaboration with academic schools and other professional services to enhance engagement, retention and success:** The project seeks to build on existing provision, developing new approaches such as the Employer Mentoring Programme and tailoring existing personal and professional development activities to facilitate the engagement of wider access students.

[Evidence of effectiveness/impact](#)

Improved data relating to target group participation in personal and professional development activities have led to the increased emphasis on delivery of Confident Futures workshops via an integrated model (i.e. within academic programmes) through working collaboratively with module leaders. The TACF project has also led to an increasing emphasis on partnership working with teams in the professional services sphere, such as collaborative design and delivery of activities.

Evaluating the effectiveness and impact of the project is a core activity, supported by a project evaluation post together with a Working Group and Steering Group that guide the work programme and provide an oversight role.

Evaluation evidence gathered to date suggests that the programme is achieving its outcomes. The project has successfully increased target group participation in employability-focused personal and professional development activities. In year one, 14.5% of the target group engaged with TACF project activities, rising to 20% engagement in year two. Robust monitoring and evaluation processes have been developed to support the identification of the wider access target group within the undergraduate population, assessing participation rates across a range of activities, and gathering and analysing a wide range of evaluation data to evidence impact.

Employer mentoring is achieving its outcomes. It was intended that for each year of the programme, 60 mentors would be effectively trained to mentor an employer mentee. In years one and two, this figure was surpassed, with 81 mentors trained in year one and a further 70 in year two. There were 76 mentors matched with a mentee each in year one, and in year two 83 active mentors mentored a total of 87 mentees. In the current year, a further 61 mentors have been trained, with 85 active mentor/mentee matches. Satisfaction rates of greater or equal to 90% have been achieved for both mentors and mentees across the first two years of the programme, and findings from quantitative and qualitative evaluation have highlighted a range of benefits associated with participation including:

- improved confidence;
- CV skills, interview skills, job search skills;
- industry insight and knowledge;
- exploring career options;
- identifying transferable skills and how these can be put into practice in the workplace.

Improved self-assessment ratings on three aspects relevant to graduate employability have also been demonstrated for employer mentees who participated in year one and two on the following aspects:

- current skills and attributes relevant to gaining a graduate job;
- knowledge/awareness of graduate job opportunities;
- confidence about the job application process – CV preparation, networking, applying for jobs, interviews.

Further evidence of the success of the project comes from two forms of external recognition. Firstly, the Employer Mentoring Programme was awarded Mentoring Project of the Year 2011 in the Scottish Mentoring Network National Recognition Awards. In addition, the programme was the first recipient of the Scottish Mentoring Network Quality Award, a

newly created quality standard developed in 2011 for mentoring projects operating in Scotland.

Monitoring of student educational outcomes and Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey returns is also being undertaken to demonstrate project impact on degree outcomes and graduate employment. To date, there are early indications of a positive impact on student educational outcomes for participants. For example, the percentage of TACF year one participants achieving a 'good' Honours degree was 72.3% in comparison to 60.8% for the TACF target group (i.e. those who were part of the target group but who did not participate in any of the initiatives), and 62.6% for the overall UK population at Edinburgh Napier University. TACF year one participants were less likely to exit with an Ordinary degree and more likely to leave with an Honours degree at the end of their fourth year in comparison to the TACF target group who did not participate in project activities.

Informal tracking of project participants beyond HE, and a programme of qualitative research with graduates who participated in the first two years of the programme, is also being undertaken, which it is anticipated will provide further evidence of the ways in which participating in the programme may enhance graduate employment outcomes.

Websites

<http://www.napier.ac.uk/confidentfutures>

http://www.napier.ac.uk/confidentfutures/Towards_A_Confident_Future/EmployerMentoring/Pages/default.aspx

<http://www.napier.ac.uk/prospectivestudents/standoutfromthecrowd/Pages/StandOutfromtheCrowd.aspx>

Feeding back to feed forward: formative assessment as a platform for effective practice

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Keywords

- feedback;
- formative assessment
- higher education;
- learning.

Nature of intervention

The use of focus groups to explore the effectiveness of formative assessment and feedback on learning.

Focus of intervention

The focus of the intervention is academic: formative assessment and learning.

Description of intervention

During the months of May and June 2011 a research project was undertaken at one of the leading providers of sport-related degree programmes in the UK to explore the effectiveness of formative assessment and feedback on learning. Five focus group discussions were undertaken with students and academic staff involved with a range of modules and degree pathways. Three were with undergraduate students at Level 4 (n=3), Level 5 (n=3) and Level 6 (n=4), and one with taught postgraduate students (n=4). Module leaders of the modules identified in these student focus groups were subsequently invited to a further focus group (n=3). This paper outlines the resultant recommendations for academic policy and practice within a higher education context. Specifically, the study highlighted the importance of providing frequent opportunities for formative assessment and feedback to encourage a deep approach to learning and therefore facilitate greater student engagement (which should contribute to success). Furthermore, to ensure that these assessment and feedback practices are effective, it is suggested that the level of challenge and expectations (of students and HEIs) need to be considered during the first year of

undergraduate studies so that students work to fulfil their potential rather than demonstrate adequacy. This paper identifies the need to consider the approach taken by HEIs in relation to feedback and assessment.

How the intervention engages students and improves student success

The notion of student-centred approaches to learning in higher education has been discussed widely in the literature (Biggs, 1999; Lea, Stephenson and Troy, 2003; Elen *et al.*, 2007; Maclellan, 2008; Hockings, 2009). However, given some of the recent attempts within HE to adopt more student-centred modes of delivery (some might say as a response to demand from paying ‘customers’), a question remains about the extent to which HEIs are merely reinforcing the high level of dependency created through the current schooling and further education systems in the UK. Nevertheless, it is clear from the research findings of the focus groups undertaken as part of this study that the management of students’ expectations (irrespective of the learning environment) makes an important contribution to learning (see also Cross, 1996).

One undergraduate explained:

... if there’s more of a challenge then I work harder. In some modules it just seems like a rehash of ‘A’ level so I switched off.

Increasing the level of challenge in assessment may therefore prove beneficial for some students if they are inspired to ‘work harder’ and hence learn more deeply and more effectively. However, this cannot be linked directly (and only) to an elevation of the minimum threshold for adequacy (i.e. making it more difficult to pass) – this would be simplistic, and in the spirit of embracing students’ individual learning needs, even counter-intuitive. Instead there are actions that might be introduced or implemented more fully, especially at Level 4 (the first year of a full-time Honours degree programme). This marks an important transition phased from immediate post-compulsory education into HE and students are required to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to fulfil their potential during Levels 5 and 6. All students who participated in the present study (including postgraduates) suggested that they received the least feedback during their first year at university and would have welcomed more frequent opportunities for feedback across all years of study. The point is uncomplicated: Level 4 is the platform for subsequent levels, and needs therefore to be as strong and robust as it can be.

It is not just assessment practices that are important here. A carefully considered programme of teaching (smaller groups and innovating teaching methods where large groups are inevitable) and assessment that includes a variety of formative and summative assessment modes as well as opportunities for different types of feedback would help to develop a culture of deep learning (Boud, 2000). Moreover, by making explicit the criteria associated with excellent work, as well as facilitating and even accelerating the transition to

learner independence, would nurture a learning culture in which students are rewarded for fulfilling potential (and not merely demonstrating mere adequacy).

Overall, students perceive formative assessment and feedback to contribute to continual development and ultimately to summative grades, but do not feel as though they receive adequate opportunities to engage with this type of assessment and feedback. Therefore, a greater emphasis on formative assessment and feedback throughout the year is likely to encourage students to read around the subject more frequently rather than strategically waiting until the summative assessment is due. The message is clear: the context in which the learner is placed needs to be considered more carefully, and programmes of study need to be designed to develop deep learners. This requires a move away from tutor transmission of information and knowledge toward student-centred learning (Barr and Tagg, 1995; DeCorte, 1996; Nicol, 1997; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Link to ‘What Works?’ conceptual model and findings

There is a clear link with the findings of this study and the academic sphere of the conceptual model and findings from the ‘What Works?’ programme. This relates specifically to the following:

1. A move from a teacher-centred paradigm to a student-centred paradigm.
2. The importance of timely and formative feedback on academic progress.
3. An adaptation of the learning environment from large to small class teaching (but also the need to consider innovative teaching practices within large-class settings where programmes have such large cohorts of students).

The findings of this study serve to reinforce the findings from the ‘What Works?’ programme in relation to the areas noted above, but also recognise that this model may not be a case of ‘one size fits all’. It is important to consider the impact of large cohorts of students on modes of delivery and assessment and feedback practices and to learn from student and staff feedback in order to adapt the model to ensure the practices employed by HEIs maximise student retention and success irrespective of any practical constraints.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

The findings of the study highlighted that, on the whole, students only consider feedback in relation to summative assessment. When asked about the types of feedback they received during the course of the year, students typically referred only to written feedback on assignments. A typical comment:

... we don't get feedback as such, the only feedback we get is if you've had a piece of coursework back you get a feedback sheet, that's the only feedback we get.

Students did agree, however, that they would welcome more frequent opportunities for feedback that allowed them to monitor their progress and identify areas for development. In other words, these students valued (formative) feedback that enabled and encouraged continual development and learning. Moreover, continual development was also considered to be dependent upon the frequency of formative feedback:

I think definitely more frequency of feedback would be helpful, because we tend not to get that much, and most of what you do get is after the assessment's gone in, which isn't going to help you with that assessment.

The tutors concurred that formative assessment and feedback practices could be improved upon. One lecturer explained that:

... a lot of assessments are at the end of the year ... ongoing assessment could help to identify what the students need to work on.

This instrumental approach to student achievement in summative assessment is in itself a powerful driver for using formative assessment and feedback, and given the widespread acknowledgement of their value by tutors and students, the case for their inclusion seems overwhelming. For some students, it was a straightforward point: (formative) feedback contributed to their overall module grade because they were able to identify and address the deficiencies in their knowledge and application of that knowledge. Moreover, it was individualised formative feedback that was most appreciated, for it was only this that enabled students to locate their own shortcomings very precisely, and hence improve on their learning. There were also examples of how both generic and personalised formative feedback could be integrated into a seminar:

... I took my essay ... and she read it, she told me what I needed to improve on, and that was the best feedback I had all year. You're sitting in a room with ten people but she was going round each person individually and if it was a relevant point she was giving it to the whole group and that was good.

This outcome-driven approach to formative assessment (i.e. one that depicts formative assessment as a 'means to an end' to improve achievement in summative assessment) is compelling. Yet it is apparent that while students were driven by the desire to achieve, this did not imply that they only ever adopted a surface or strategic approach to learning (although the focus for the discussion here was related to coursework as opposed to unseen examinations). Students suggested that it was the learning that takes place as a result of formative assessment and feedback that contributed to their summative assessment grade. This emphasises the importance of the frequency of formative assessment and feedback for enhancing deep learning and cultivating Boud's (2000) 'learning society'. In some ways this is an even more compelling argument because it values learning beyond the shallow regurgitation of knowledge for 'traditional' modes of assessment (as well as

preparing students for them). For these students, the perception of insufficient formative assessment and feedback contributed to a surface or strategic approach to learning. A greater emphasis on formative assessment and feedback would therefore help to facilitate a positive learning culture, which in turn has direct implications for future learning, performance and employability. However, as discussed previously, it is not only the provision of opportunity for formative assessment that is important here, but also the nature of the challenge (as perceived by the student) as students suggest that they work harder when they are faced with a challenge.

To conclude, this small study has a number of potential implications for policy and practice. Firstly, there is a need to acknowledge the changing nature of HE and to consider and adapt teaching methods, assessment and feedback practices accordingly. In particular, in the planning of the student learning experience overall, HEIs should consider the extent to which they offer students frequent opportunities for formative assessment and feedback. These are key ingredients in the development of a deep approach to learning. It is also important that the perspectives of both students and staff are considered in relation to the development of deep approaches to learning. The transition into HE requires considerable attention with a focus on enhancing the learning environment and reinforcing its importance as the platform upon which success should be built. Specifically, it is now timely to emphasise the nature of challenge and level of expectation to which students are exposed. These form part of the learning culture, but can nurture deep learning and, in turn, a learning society.

This study focused on processes (assessment and feedback strategies) and their links to the student learning experience rather than measurable outcomes (i.e. academic achievement). In doing so it provides an important basis for further research (in particular, a longitudinal study) to explore the relation between the two. Ultimately, this will contribute to a greater awareness and understanding of formative assessment and feedback practices and their relationship with learning.

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Section 6: Strategic change

The final section in this compendium draws attention to six different interventions all of that have contributed to strategic change within higher education institutions. The first of these is discussed by Anne Boyle of the University of Sunderland where charitable fundraising is being used as an 'extra-curriculum' learning tool for students from the Faculty of Education and Society. The paper shows how through the innovative use of fundraising activities programme staff have promoted a sense of community among the students and in doing so encouraged the development of strong peer support networks.

Extra-curricular activities are also discussed by Wayne Clark of the University of Westminster who describes how an employability scheme delivered by the Career Development Centre engages students through the provision of a 'Skills Award'. Based upon an active learning approach the Skills Award increases students confidence while providing them with crucial skills needed to succeed in the job market.

An alternative institutional strategy is discussed by Stuart Brand and Luke Millard *et al.* who describe how, at Birmingham City University, the Student Academic Partners (SAP) scheme has facilitated a sense of ownership and pride in the institution and its programmes by offering students and staff the opportunity to work together in a collaborative and supported environment.

Another intervention in which staff-student partnership and engagement is key is described by Andrea Jackson and Katie Livesey of the University of Leeds. By identifying the barriers and enablers to the engagement of students within the learning community, several initiatives aimed at promoting and advancing staff-student engagement have been introduced resulting in a more positive learning environment for all.

Developing the theme of 'partnership', Delyth Chambers describes a university-business partnership in which the University of East London's booksellers, John Smith and Sons, work with the University to offer students a progress bursary with which they are able to buy books and other items essential for successful study.

Curriculum-related fundraising activities

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Keywords

- fundraising;
- cohort identity;
- curriculum.

Nature of intervention

Fundraising as part of the learning experience.

Focus of intervention

The intervention is academic and social in nature.

Description of intervention

A number of charitable fundraising activities have been developed within the Childhood Studies degree programme since 2008-09 that have had a significant impact on cohort sense of identity. This was the overall aim of the addition to the student experience. The objectives were not only to raise funds for children's charities as relevant to the degree programme, but also to provide an environment that encourages the formation of strong peer bonds through collaboration and engagement in enjoyable activities. There is a strong emphasis on enhancing the student experience through promoting a climate that prioritises both fun and learning. This has resulted in the range of activities increasing and being organised by students rather than by the principle academic who developed the initiative, as was the case for the first years of this intervention.

Fundraising events were small in 2008-09, with students working in groups on a rota basis to hold weekly cake sales in class and donating proceeds to Barnado's and the Children's Society at the end of the year. This developed into activities outside of class time, such as sponsored walks, a 'spooky sleepover' at the Castle Keep in Newcastle, a zumba dance

event, a ski-athon, and a mini-Olympics in June 2011, which involved up to 200 students from all years of the Childhood Studies programme.

The type of activities are deliberately chosen to allow as many students as possible to participate, given that the programme includes a large number of mature students with children, so the sponsored walk, for example, enabled parents to bring their children along so these students weren't excluded.

How the intervention engages students and improves student success

As part of the 'What Works?' Student Retention and Success project, the University of Sunderland evaluated fundraising activities in Childhood Studies, to understand any impact they had on a student's sense of belonging. The findings show that there has been a significant impact on students' sense of identity with their cohort, culminating in an independently student-organised Childhood Studies Graduation Ball in July 2011, the first for this programme.

The Programme Leader highlighted a key outcome of this initiative as increased social integration among a cohort that is principally local to the institution, i.e. whose home address was in or near to Sunderland before they started their course, and where they lived while studying. These students typically leave campus to attend to other commitments such as paid work or childcare, so have less time to develop a sense of belonging. However, Childhood Studies students involved in fundraising activities were seen to spend more time in the library or on campus. As a result of increased interest and involvement of all year groups, students from all three years of the programme worked together so there was more opportunity for Level 3 and 2 students advising and ultimately supporting those in lower years.

Two other important outcomes resulting from closer working with other students are improved attainment levels, and development of a sense of community, which was an aim of academic staff involved in setting up the initiative. In addition, data analysed for the 'What Works?' research indicated there was an increase in the proportion of Childhood Studies students retained to Level 2 of their programme.

Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings

An important finding of Sunderland's research to explore the effects of social integration on non-completion among local students is that social activities are not deemed to be of value for their own sake among these achievement-oriented students. The target group neither wants nor need extra social activity to fit into their busy lives, therefore it is essential that there is an academic benefit to activities that are designed, at least in part, towards developing group or cohort identity.

For this reason, curriculum-related fundraising activities fall in both the academic and social spheres of the conceptual model. The targeted activity relevant to this programme area could be tailored in other subject areas through appropriate development and guidance from academic staff in those areas. The involvement of enthusiastic and committed academic staff is central to this activity particularly in the early stages; therefore it can enhance capacity to engage of both students and staff.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Qualitative evidence from the Childhood Studies Programme Leader shows how academic staff notice benefits to students involved in these activities, for their sense of identity, spending more time on campus studying, developing a sense of community, working with students at different stages of the programme, and improving attainment levels. Quotes from staff include:

Gives much more of a sense of community. The third-years have now been mentioning it to the second-years and the second-years have been mentioning it to the first-years to help them get more involved.

They are going into the library [more], we are seeing an impact on their achievement levels, but more importantly we have a sense of community and an identity whereas they couldn't really have that before.

Because of the relationship between the second-year students and the third-year students we see the third-year students preparing students for their transitions into their final year, especially making them aware of the expectations and how to manage their time.

Interviews and focus groups with students involved in these activities also provides evidence that the initiative has proved popular and has had an impact on their sense of belonging. Student comments include:

It's just great!

They've realised quite a lot of the course, our year especially, we're really like clique-y. We didn't really do anything. That's why it started off. And then the first-years and second-years and third-years, I think it's trying to get us all involved a bit more.

I'll be going along and doing one activity or another and just basically meeting different people.

Sense of belonging has been increased and you can develop a better relationship with teachers as well as other students. It also shows that we generally care about children and that is why we do the Childhood Studies course.

It created a positive environment within the class as everyone was helping to raise money together.

I quite enjoy taking part in that [fundraising], and I suppose that helps give you a sense of belonging as well, if you're all working towards the same goal.

They've realised from last year that it was a really good thing and the spirit was really good and they've taken it on a bit further with like the Olympics, so the staff have all got different teams.

This initiative began in 2008-09 and escalated from there. The proportion of Childhood Studies students retained to Level 2 was 85% in 2007-08, and increased in the following two years to 93% in 2009-10.

Website

See link for promotions regarding the June 2011 mini Olympics:

<http://www.sunderland.ac.uk/newsevents/news/news/index.php?nid=1292>

Evaluating a retention and employability initiative in higher education

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Keywords

- employability;
- careers;
- skills;
- widening participation;
- progression.

Nature of intervention

Extra-curricular employability scheme delivered by Career Development Centre at University of Westminster.

Focus of intervention

The intervention is professional in nature. It is aimed at enhancing the student experience and improving practice.

Description of intervention

Recently, there has been a proliferation of skills awards or personal development schemes designed to enhance graduate employability and improve the forward career planning of HE students. A recent survey showed that 25 HEIs were delivering new skills schemes (Scott and I'ons, 2010). The national body of university careers services, the Association of Graduate Careers Services (AGCAS), has also recently established a Skills Award Task Group and a web resource for employability awards.

In part, these schemes can be viewed as a response to increasing demand from employers for graduates with highly developed 'soft' skills relevant to the changing demands of knowledge-based global economies (CBI, 2009; UKCES, 2010). Additionally, the impact of

skills awards on retention and progression, especially among widening participation cohorts from non-traditional entry routes, is the subject of growing attention.

Targeted at Level 4 and 5 undergraduates at University of Westminster, the Career Development Centre (CDC) Skills Award is an extra-curricular scheme designed to:

- enhance engagement with a HE Careers Service and associated Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) resources;
- integrate students into participating in employability activities;
- support students in developing and articulating key skills valued by employers.

Funded by Linking London Lifelong Learning Network, the pilot stage of the Award was launched in January 2011. Twenty-six students were successfully enrolled via a competitive recruitment process requiring completion of a self-diagnostic application form based on a set of core competencies.

Four places were reserved for vocational (or non-A-level) entrants with a view to supporting transitions to higher education for non-traditional learners. Particularly, the Award is intended to raise aspiration and improve confidence among non-traditional learners.

The Award is structured around four main stages requiring regular participation in careers events and activities:

1. Preparation.
2. Skills development activities.
3. Work experience (paid or unpaid).
4. Reflection.

Students are required to undertake activities for each element including:

- completion of a self-diagnostic form;
- four one-to-one careers coaching sessions;
- attendance at Career Development Centre events (including employer networking, volunteering, job fairs, careers workshops);
- acceptance of place on a CDC scheme or membership of a professional body;
- acquiring a position of responsibility in an organisation;
- undertaking a minimum of 30 hours' paid or unpaid work (including voluntary work) via the CDC vacancies hosting service and Volunteer team;
- delivering a presentation to a panel including an employer.

Participants accrue points for each activity in order to achieve the Skills Award, and successful students will receive a CDC certificate at a ceremony in May 2012. Attendance at events and completion of activities is recorded using a system of verification forms.

All participants are assigned a designated careers consultant from the CDC to provide students with tailored one-to-one career coaching. Participants are provided with career coaching support with a view to improving the student's CV and application form through diagnostic work. The career coaching is also designed to develop forward career planning.

The Award is supported by a dedicated virtual learning environment designed in partnership with the Online Learning Team at the University of Westminster. The VLE includes an e-portfolio and a dedicated Blackboard site, as well as being integrated into the CDC online events/vacancy listing system. The first Skills Award cohort has completed in January 2012.

How the intervention engages students

Student engagement with the careers service (as part of the professional sphere) has been enhanced by the fact that the Award is delivered flexibly alongside the undergraduate curriculum. As such, each student has been able to progress in an individualised manner and can take advantage of CDC services in a way that suits their personal timetable.

Students are required to develop independent learning skills by participating in the four stage programme on an individual basis. They are required to progress through the four stages with the overall aim of improving their career planning by the end of the scheme. It is anticipated that participants will leave the scheme with enhanced self-confidence and self-efficacy when preparing for the transition to the graduate labour market. The Award supports students in developing their CV and generating improved evidence of competency/skills.

More broadly, the scheme is intended to improve student integration into the services of the CDC from an early stage of the undergraduate degree. This, in turn, is intended to impact positively upon engagement with careers information and resources and therefore enhance a student's employability. Discussions are currently ongoing with the School of Life Science at University of Westminster with a view to rolling out a modified version of the Skills Award across the undergraduate cohort at Level 4 during 2011-12.

Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings

The Skills Award scheme was designed from the outset to enhance student engagement with the Career Development Centre, a CEIAG service within the professional sphere. It is based on an active learning model of career development, in which students are required to undertake independent and reflective activity related to their own personal career development via the e-portfolio and discussions with their designated careers

consultant. The authenticity of the scheme in relation to the 'world of work' has been built into the programme by requiring students to undertake at least 30 hours of work experience and attend careers-related events. Exposure to employers has also been reinforced by student attendance at employer networking events. The requirement for students to present to a panel featuring an employer is particularly relevant in this respect.

Although the scheme is not linked directly to the academic sphere, issues of pedagogy have been relevant. The use of a one-to-one format for providing ongoing feedback from a careers consultant is crucial in this regard. Given that learners who have entered HE from non-traditional entry routes (i.e. non-A-level) have been shown to engage less with support services such as career services, the Skills Award is, in part, targeted at entrants who are more likely to be at risk of drop out in the first year of an undergraduate degree. Video interviews with Access to HE entrants have been uploaded to the CDC website with a view to including a more learner-centred model of feedback on the scheme.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

The impact of the CDC Skills Award has been evaluated via the following mechanisms:

Feedback on events and activities

Feedback has been collected from students at Skills Award events on an ongoing basis. One participant described the launch event as “very informative, well explained” with students welcoming the chance to meet fellow Award participants and meet “helpful and motivated staff you can ask for advice in the future”. Comments for other events have included:

Very informative and relevant.

Helped me feel more at ease about applying for a job.

Hearing other people's stories was useful.

Online video interviews

Three 'talking head' videos featuring Skills Award students have been produced. The interviews provide qualitative evidence of the emerging positive impact of the Skills Award pilot in relation to:

- importance of being able to articulate skills and work experience to employers;
- positive impact of one-to-one coaching with careers consultants;
- gaining self-confidence;
- improved independent working;

- gaining a perceived advantage in the graduate labour market;
- improving preparation for job applications;
- improving forward career planning;
- increased integration into use of CDC services;
- value of the e-portfolio;
- flexibility of the Award;
- 'value-added' dimension of the Award.

Examples of quotes evidencing the impact of the Award in relation to retention and career planning include:

I've started to realise how important it is for me to build up my employability skills to make me stand out from the crowd. (HNC entrant)

The Skills Award is going to give me the confidence to not think about what I can't do but what positive things I've done that I can articulate to an employer. (Access to HE entrant)

It's a good award to be in ... because it helps you stand out ... it helps you to evaluate the skills that you want ... it gives you the confidence ... and you're actually showing that you're doing more than following what your course is saying. (Access to HE entrant)

Employer feedback

The initial design of the Award was endorsed by a representative from the Association of Graduate Recruiters. Feedback from employers was collected in December 2011 following the final student presentations to a panel. This panel included an employer (involved in graduate recruitment) and careers consultants from the CDC.

Although the Award has proved to be resource intensive, the evidence collected so far does indicate that the scheme is valued by participants. The Award does appear to be having a positive impact on improving personal career planning, and more broadly integrating participants into the CDC as an aspect of their student life.

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Website

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/skillsaward>

Related publications, resources and further information

Video interviews with Skills Award students:

<http://cavpod.wmin.ac.uk/~video/department/case/skillsaward/index.html>

CDC Skills Award Pilot Final Report for Linking London Lifelong Learning Network: Available at:

<http://www.linkinglondon.ac.uk>

The CDC Skills Award is featured in the Linking London 2011 Annual Development Fund publication *Catalyst for Change* (p. 11): Available at: <http://www.linkinglondon.ac.uk>

The CDC Skills Award is part of the AGCAS Employability Awards Case Study Series:

http://www.agcas.org.uk/agcas_resources/314-Employability-Awards-Case-Study-Series-

Student Academic Partners

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Keywords

- engagement;
- partnership;
- Students' Union;
- equality;
- learning community.

Nature of intervention

Building the learning community through Student Academic Partners: a partnership initiative from Birmingham City University and Birmingham City Students' Union.

Focus of intervention

The intervention is academic, social and professional. It seeks to enhance the student experience and improve practice.

Description of intervention

Since 2009 Birmingham City University (BCU) and Birmingham City Students' Union (BCSU) have worked in partnership to enhance student engagement and improve student success through the Student Academic Partners (SAP) scheme.

The SAP scheme aims to integrate students into the teaching and pedagogic research communities of faculties as a way to develop collaboration between students and staff, generating a sense of ownership and pride in the institution and its programmes. The scheme provides students and staff with the opportunity to work in collaboration to strengthen learning and teaching at the University.

Through this approach we hope to improve student achievement and retention through having courses that are more student focused and more flexible and reactive to student perspectives.

The SAP scheme is a strategic, University-wide initiative that can potentially address all aspects of the student learning experience through the main vehicle of student and staff collaboration. The fundamental principles of the SAP scheme align themselves well to the ‘What Works?’ model as all facets of the model (academic, social and professional) are embedded throughout the scheme and can also be addressed through individual projects. The scheme also aligns with the ten principles behind engagement activities as it is inclusive, flexible, transparent, ongoing, timely, relevant, integrated, monitored and collaborative.

In 2011-12 applications to the SAP scheme increased by 38% with 105 applications and 50 projects (See Table 1) being selected for funding. These projects encompass all areas of the University’s activities and each one is co-designed by students and staff to develop a specific aspect of learning and teaching practice. Typically, these projects can be split into two broad categories. The first of these involves the development of new content/learning, resources/assessment approaches around a curriculum focus, while the second encompasses consultative, survey or networking projects around a student engagement focus.

Table 1: A three-year record of SAP applications and awarded projects**

SAP	Number of applications	Number of projects awarded
2009-10	52	25
2010-11	76	47
2011-12	105	50*

** Those projects not selected for SAP funding are not discarded, but other funding avenues are sought. A further 12 projects have been supported through other means.

The University and Students’ Union see effective learning partnerships between students and staff as the cornerstone of their activities. It is imperative to the scheme that students are employed as partners not assistants, co-creators not passive recipients of the learning experience. Moreover, it allows students to utilise their existing knowledge through a

more dynamic and realistic learning process. At the same time, it enables academic staff to learn from students, regarding contemporary issues within the University.

An example of a student view came from a project in our Faculty of Performance, Media and English:

The SAP project gave me the opportunity to work closely with a staff member who has taught me a variety of applied skills which I can now put into practice. It is great to be able to get this kind of experience when you know your input is valued and has an effect, whilst not interfering with my final degree studies. Working at an equal level like this with teaching staff has been very fulfilling, as it has shown how you can learn by working as equals in collaboration on a project, not just in a teacher-student relationship.

In the process of implementing the SAP scheme several challenges were issued to the SAP team. The first considered the breadth of participants and whether all faculties, staff and students would engage with the scheme. This led on to a second challenge around whether the SAP scheme would only attract the best and the brightest students. The final challenge revolved around impact and whether the scheme could be shown to improve the student experience and ultimately student retention and success.

How the intervention engages students

Student Academic Partners projects can be developed and led by students or staff, but they require an equality of operation in the delivery of the project. The Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching provides funding for and administers the scheme in conjunction with the Students' Union. Students are paid to work on each project for a maximum of 100 hours and are employed by the Students' Union as another example of the partnership ethos.

Over the three years of the SAP scheme the initiative has engaged with nearly 400 students. However, this is a small proportion of the total student population. Studies are now being undertaken to determine the impact of SAP activities on the wider population. For example, if a solitary SAP project develops a new learning resource for a large health-related course this could impact on over 500 students in one academic year. We are also exploring the rate of SAP infection on students and staff across the University and how the ethos of the scheme is spread by its enthusiastic participants across the institution.

Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual framework and findings

The SAP scheme follows an ethos that students and staff should act in partnership, which clearly aligns with the academic sphere within the model. A specific project example that would address the academic element of the model was one focused upon 'Student

perspectives on frameworks of assessment and feedback' from the Faculty of Technology, Engineering and the Environment.

The social sphere of the model is embraced through the staff and student partners exchanging and trading ideas through the SAP marketplace workshops. These support and evaluative sessions offer project teams the chance to network and trade ideas and skills with other SAP project teams. Social activities allow students to make friends, and engage more widely in opportunities available, and become a true cohort. Students and staff also undergo an interesting journey as they discover the abilities and strengths of each partner. This is often with greater emphasis on the staff member as they begin to recognise the value their student partners bring to the project. An example of a relevant project was developed in the Faculty of Education, Law and Social Sciences around a Student Advisory Board being created from a community of students and staff. This body discussed and acted upon student opinion that was potentially broader than a single course-based issue.

The professional service sphere is fundamentally addressed through the partnerships and relationships that student and staff teams develop throughout the life of their projects and beyond. For example, students and staff from the Birmingham Conservatoire initiated a project called 'Networking for employability of Conservatoire students'. This enabled students to improve their networking skills, develop contacts and become more aware of how to access employment after they left university.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Since 2009, the SAP scheme has made rapid progress in relation to the participation across the University. As the scheme expanded in its second year the number of students and staff involved increased by over 200% across the 47 projects. The number of participants has now stabilised, but the variety of courses continues to rise as collaborative work within and across faculties increases. This in essence answers the initial challenge that faced the SAP team around the breadth of participation. Table 2 shows the expansion in numbers, which reflects the wider engagement by course teams. The momentum for student and staff collaboration across the University has now been established and participants expect the scheme to be available each year to improve the next aspect of the student experience.

Table 2: Intake of SAP partners

	Number of students	Number of staff	Number of courses
2009	44	23	22
2010	165	82	71
2011	175	82	80

Research is currently underway, regarding the second challenge around the nature of students who engage and whether they are only the brightest students. Early findings have

shown that students exemplify all levels of attainment within the University and we hope to be able to provide more information on these findings in the coming months.

Students and staff partners believe the SAP scheme to be extremely beneficial to them in various ways. Examples of student views include:

The SAP scheme gave me the opportunity to work closely with staff members, who taught me a number of varied/applicable skills and supported me all the way.

The SAP scheme is a great experience – your input is valued and has an effect. To work solely on a project with a member of staff at the University is very unusual and I think it was an excellent idea to team staff and students together, as it has broken the barrier.

From this experience I feel I have further developed my team working, time management, and organisational skills. What I enjoyed most is the partnership we have formed and throughout the project the balance between working on tasks collectively and independently.

While one member of staff stated:

Students offer a wealth of knowledge and insights into the student experience and together, through this project, we have been able to add to that experience through extension of provision for learning outside of the school's degree programme provision.

Another staff member was more pragmatic and said:

... the biggest benefit for me was getting the resource produced and being able to achieve a more ambitious project than I would otherwise have been able to do working alone.

For some projects the product may be more important than the ethos of the scheme. This is acceptable as the product will benefit the course through the production of better learning resources. In this way the student learning experience will be improved.

Research around the final challenge of whether the scheme could be shown to improve the student experience and ultimately student retention and success is now being undertaken and the paper authors hope to be able to share these findings at the end of this year.

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The Career Development Centre Skills Award: understanding and promoting student engagement in GEES learning communities

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Keywords

- engagement;
- student experience;
- community building.

Nature of intervention

A research project in the School of Earth and Environment at the University of Leeds investigating the barriers and enablers to engagement of students as partners in a learning community.

Focus of intervention

This project recognises that social interaction as well as involvement in the academic and research community all contribute to the student experience. It uses data and evaluation to improve targeting and effectiveness of interventions to facilitate involvement in, and enhance the sense of belonging of students to, a learning community. The project also involves measuring academic staff perspectives of student engagement in order to improve practice.

Description of intervention

This project explores engagement in the context of behaviours, activities, events and opportunities that facilitate involvement in, and enhance the sense of belonging to, the School of Earth and Environment (SEE) community and academic discipline. It recognises that social interaction and involvement in the academic and research community contribute to the student experience.

The School has used a combination of focus groups, interviews and surveys (based on the North American and Australasian Surveys of Student Engagement, NSSE and AUSSE) to investigate the enablers, barriers and effective practices in the engagement of undergraduate

students within the School as 'partners in a learning community'. The survey was administered to all undergraduates within the school (634 students) in 2011. A prize was offered to encourage students to complete the survey and a total of 374 responses (59%) were received. The project will also involve applying the same methodology at other higher education institutions in 2012 in order to learn about effective practice across a range of learner constituencies (part-time, international, mature students) within the disciplines of Earth and Environmental Sciences.

The survey explores student engagement according to three of the dimensions addressed in the NSSE and AUSSE:

- student and staff interactions – the level and nature of students' contact and interaction with teaching staff;
- enriching educational experiences – students' participation in broadening educational activities;
- supportive learning environment – students' feelings of support within the school community.

Results have helped identify and introduce interventions (both student and staff led) to build academic community and enhance engagement. While many are relevant to the School as a whole, information has helped identify that multiple communities exist within the School requiring a multi-intervention approach to enhance engagement. The survey will be repeated in 2012 to measure the continued effectiveness of these interventions and identify new opportunities for engagement.

A staff survey is also being used in order to measure academics' perceptions of:

- the proportion of their students who engage in different activities and the frequency with which they do so;
- how students feel about support within their academic community;
- the nature and frequency of staff-student interactions;
- how academics organise their time, both in and out of the classroom.

Survey results are being used to: help identify gaps between student engagement and staff expectations; provide a forum to engage staff in discussions about student engagement; and, provide information on staff awareness and perceptions of student learning.

Examples of interventions that have so far been introduced include:

- A student-led newsletter (Leeds Earth and Environment Pages, LEEP) produced each semester involving interviews with staff about their research, student society news, field trip reports and forthcoming events. The intention has been to involve the students in creating a resource that informs them about the research that is being

carried out within the School in a way that they understand, and bring together relevant information for them in one place.

- A fortnightly LEEP event listing is sent by email to all students. This includes information about all research seminars within the School and other discipline-related events that students are encouraged to attend.
- Using social network systems such as Facebook and Twitter to inform students about activities and opportunities, but to also engage them in dialogue about expectations of their student experience.
- ‘SEE (School of Earth and Environment) Behind the Scenes’ building open evening events whereby students can visit the many research facilities within the School and hear from staff about the activity that takes place within these and how this relates to their teaching.
- Welcome BBQ with School Student Society Fair to encourage new students to meet each other and the opportunity for them to get involved in one of the many student societies.
- Establishment of a Student Experience Fund enabling students to apply for funding to support projects that encourage collaboration and community building within the school.
- Establishment of a School Student Society Forum to bring students together, encourage collaboration and raise awareness of each society’s schedule of activities.
- Employment of Student Engagement Ambassadors who work closely with a newly appointed School’s Student Experience Officer to help identify and facilitate engagement activities.

How the intervention engages students

The term ‘student engagement’ is used as a catch-all term to describe the many behaviours characterising students who are said to be more involved with their university community than their less engaged peers. It is a complex interplay of factors that occur across different levels (individual learner through to institutional), but at the heart of the many models of understanding and enhancing learning is including students as partners in a learning community and involving them in educationally orientated activities and in both the academic and social aspects of the university experience, in order to facilitate positive outcomes including persistence, satisfaction, achievement and academic success. The aim of this project within the School of Earth and Environment has been to understand how to build a stronger sense of academic community within the School in order to stimulate staff and student involvement and thereby encourage learning.

Link to ‘What Works?’ conceptual model and findings

This work spans both the academic and social sphere of the conceptual model and findings from the ‘What Works?’ programme. In relation to the academic sphere, the project has involved facilitating student and staff involvement as partners in their academic School

community. Interventions have: enhanced awareness among students of the research activity within the School and how this links with their learning experience; encouraged attendance at research seminars that students did not previously appreciate they were welcome to attend; allowed opportunities for staff and students to engage in dialogue about research; began to help staff understand the ways in which students want to interact with them and the School; and, raised staff awareness of how students feel about the support they receive within their academic community.

The project also recognises that social interaction as well as academic involvement is an important contributor to the student experience and has provided both formal and informal activities, which are not always explicitly educationally orientated. Information from the School's student experience survey has enabled us to tailor interventions not only for discipline specific groups but also for particular year groups of students.

The project, which is now in its second year, has helped in the development of a framework for student engagement within the School, informed by focus groups, interviews and the student experience survey, which is managed and co-ordinated by a School Student Experience Officer. These qualitative and quantitative methodologies also enable the monitoring and evaluation of engagement, which in turn has enabled the development of a School student experience strategy to meet the needs of our current and future students.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

A key element of this work has been to measure student engagement through the gathering of qualitative and quantitative evidence. This has helped identify and introduce interventions that build an academic community and enhance engagement within Earth and Environment Science.

Enriching educational experiences

This part of the survey explored engagement with complimentary learning opportunities both inside and outside the classroom. Over 40% of the students who responded to the survey said that they had never attended talks/presentations/seminars within the School that were not timetabled. Although some students felt that "the school always provides seminars that are of interest to the subjects taught" there were some students who felt that "accessibility for first-years could be better". Students weren't always aware that they were welcome to attend seminars or knew when they were being held.

In response to this the School has now worked with the student societies to include seminars that are more accessible for students. All students now receive a fortnightly email listing all forthcoming events across the School.

Supportive School environment

The quality of relationships with other students and staff and related to creating a School environment that helps students thrive socially and succeed academically was explored. The results show that while there is a strong sense of belonging among students within their particular programmes, this is not as strong among students across the School. This is also borne out in the qualitative comments, with many suggesting more events that bring students from across the School together.

The School has responded to this by starting a series of events such as: an open evening to showcase research facilities; an end-of-year celebration for final-year students; and, a welcome BBQ for new first-year students with further events planned to bring staff and students from across all programmes together.

Student and staff interaction

Students were asked how often they had:

- ‘Worked with teaching staff on activities other than coursework’;
- ‘Discussed ideas from their readings or lectures with teaching staff outside of lecture/seminar time’.

Almost 80% and 40% respectively responded ‘never’. Many qualitative responses indicated that students want “more opportunities for involvement with staff research projects”. As a consequence of this the School are looking at ways for greater involvement both within the curriculum and through other means such as internships.

A repeat of the survey and focus groups in 2012 will allow further evaluation the effectiveness of interventions introduced.

Websites

<http://www.see.leeds.ac.uk/admissions-and-study/student-experience/>

<http://www.see.leeds.ac.uk/admissions-and-study/student-experience/student-engagement/>

Related publications, resources and further information

Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE):

<http://www.acer.edu.au/research/ausse>

North American National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE):

<http://nsse.iub.edu/>

The effective use of targeted bursaries to support student retention and success: the University of East London Progress Bursary

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Keywords

- academic engagement;
- learning resources;
- bursaries;
- targeted approach.

Nature of intervention

The intervention provides targeted financial support to students through the UEL Progress Bursary, which was first introduced in 2006 entry for the undergraduate home/EU cohort.

Focus of intervention

Through providing a targeted bursary the intervention is academic in nature.

Description of intervention

The University of East London is a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural institution. It takes pride in its inclusiveness and commitment to providing access to higher education for socially

disadvantaged groups. It has a large non-traditional cohort of students. Of its undergraduate students a significant number are mature (21% are aged 30 or over); half are local from East London; a large percentage are BME (>65%); and many do not have English as their first language. Prior to 2006 the University's record on student retention was generally below its benchmark requirements, with the drop-out rate running at around 15% between 2001 and 2005.

In the light of the introduction of top-up fees and enhancements to bursaries schemes, the establishment of OFFA and its new focus on retention, the University had a desire to be innovative in their approach to the challenges ahead. Many of the University's students were in financial difficulties, a significant factor feeding the retention rate as financial problems jeopardised their continued study. The University therefore recognised that they needed to keep and support students throughout their time at the University, not just upon entry which would in turn improve their retention record. They were also aware that students were already more aware of financial aid packages and so that there was a potential impact on recruitment, but that their own market research supported the national research showing the relatively low impact of bursaries on decision making of prospective students.

The University therefore made a commitment to:

- provide assistance to students in ways other than cash;
- help learning, retention and achievement;
- be distinctive in marketing to aid recruitment;
- find a solution related to achieving goals – both for the University and the student;
- find a solution with flexibility, not too prescriptive and with the ability for students to retain funds between years and at the end of study.

The University approached John Smith and Sons, who already ran their campus bookshop, to see whether they could work in partnership to provide students with books and course materials and other services. With a similar scheme already running in Africa, John Smith and Sons had a platform available, which was further developed into the Aspire scheme (see below).

The solution devised provides targeted financial support to students through the UEL Progress Bursary, which was first introduced in 2006 entry for the undergraduate home/EU cohort.

Every home/EU student who successfully completes their first semester and progresses directly into their second and submits assessments on time receives a £500 Progress Bursary. Progressing to Year 2 and Year 3 then releases further amounts of bursary support. The total value of the Progress Bursary over three years is £1,100. The Progress Bursary is in effect an account card on to which the University pays a credit that can be spent on a wide choice of goods and services as specified by the University.

The bursary is provided as credit to spend on items such as:

- books;
- stationery;
- campus accommodation;
- laptops and netbooks;
- software and IT products;
- field trips;
- Oyster card top-up;
- nursery costs;
- art materials.

Although the bursary is designed to encourage academic success in the first semester, the University was also keen to ensure that students began their studies with some support, and so John Smith and Sons enabled students to collect books and materials up to a value of £150 upon registration, effectively by allowing students' accounts to become overdrawn in a manner that placed all commercial risk with John Smith and Sons. On completion of their first semester and award of the Progress Bursary this amount is debited from the student's Aspire account.

The Aspire bursary management solution

Aspire has been designed to provide the mechanism by which student bursaries can be distributed to students in a targeted way and which allows monitoring of the use of the bursary to support an institution's strategic objectives. The system was first developed in Africa, where the University of Botswana was keen to ensure that their diverse range of students had equal access to the learning materials they would need to successfully study. Over 100,000 students in the UK and Africa have Aspire accounts.

The Aspire account loaded with bursary money provides a one-to-one data relationship with the student, which can then be fed back to the institution for monitoring and evaluation. For example, in the early part of an academic year, the Aspire system can provide data that show which students have used their bursary money and whether course books or equipment have been purchased. The University can use this as an indication of early engagement of the student and to follow up those who might be deemed to be 'at risk' of dropping out.

The choice of goods and services on which bursary monies can be used is the decision of the institution and can be flexible for targeted groups of students. The management of the scheme is primarily outsourced to John Smith and Sons working in partnership with the University.

Link to ‘What Works?’ conceptual model and findings

By providing practical support which students are to use in order to support their academic careers, this study links with the academic sphere on the ‘What Works?’ conceptual model.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

The University of East London feels that targeting bursaries to directly aid learning has:

- created a better student experience;
- engaged the academic community into improving the educational gain;
- provided data for monitoring and evaluation of effective use of expenditure;
- improved retention;
- encouraged progression and success;
- provided them with a way of meeting Government and HE sector strategies including the requirements of the University’s latest OFFA Access Agreement.

Since its introduction in 2006-07, two cohorts of Progress Bursary students have now completed their degree, which provides a rich set of data to interrogate.

Monitoring and targeting

The pie chart below shows that spending by students has mostly been to support their academic studies – meaning that the bursary equips students with the tools to engage with their studies.

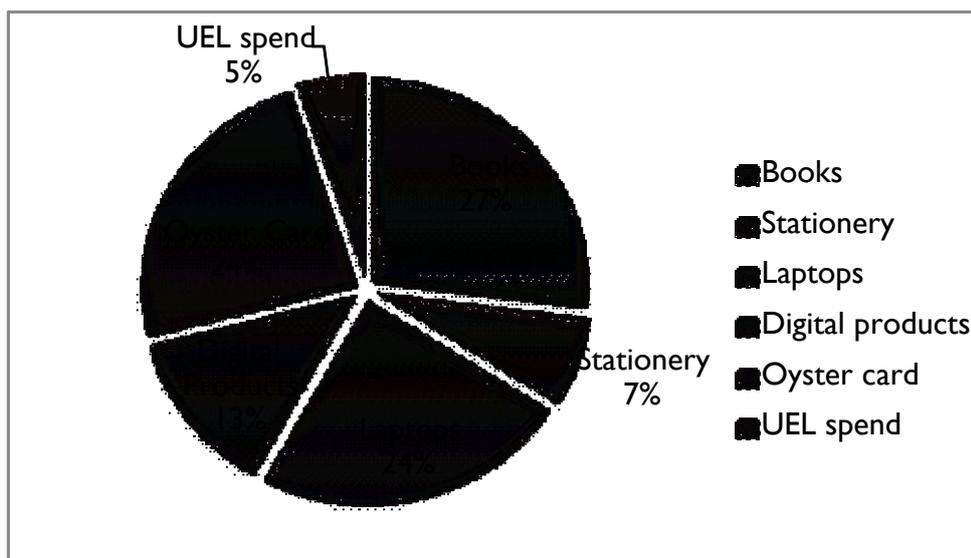


Figure 1: UEL Progress Bursary student spend by product group 2011

Retention

The Progress Bursary has played a major role in the University of East London's retention strategy: The University has seen a significant improvement in retention over the last three years in which data is available, with the student drop-out rate improving from 14% in 2006-7 to 7.3% in 2008-9 against a benchmark of 13%.

Educational outcomes

Data also show a parallel between spending on books and degree outcome of the two graduating classes in 2010 and 2011. How causal this relationship is requires further analysis, but is interesting nonetheless.

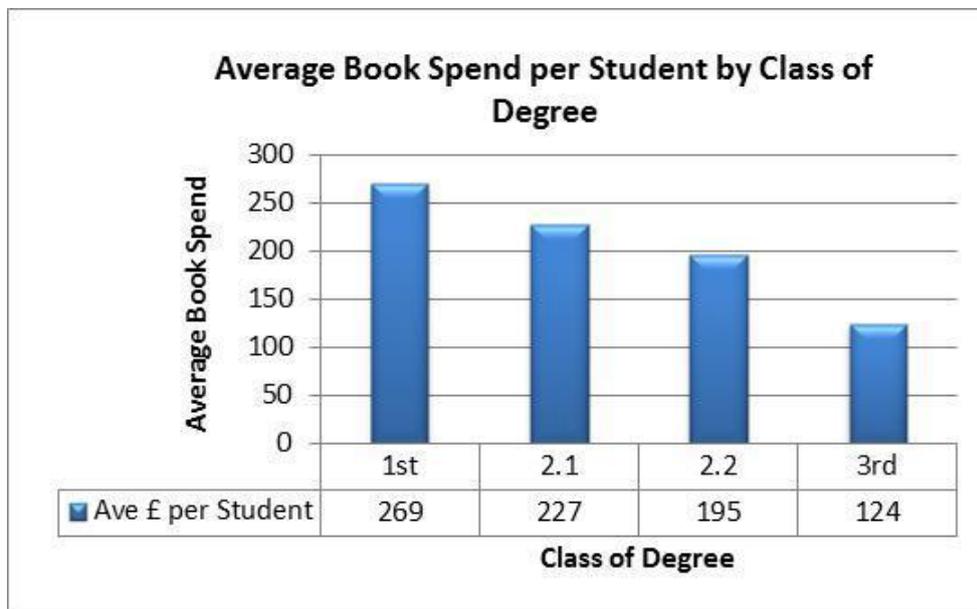


Figure 2: Average book spend per student by class of degree

Academic engagement

Data from John Smith and Sons have shown that in those institutions where there is a John Smith campus bookshop the propensity of academic staff to recommend course textbooks and reading lists has declined sharply, over the past ten years. Engagement with the academic community has suggested that this has related to concerns by academics over the increasing diversity of the student body and the equality of access to funds to buy learning resources. Academics have therefore tended not to require students to purchase books where in the past they might have. Since Aspire has become embedded in UEL, academics are now more likely to provide reading lists or recommend equipment as they are now assured that the funds have been provided to allow students to purchase what they need.

Students' views

In a survey of Progress Bursary recipients carried out by the University: 83% felt that having access to the books they needed at the start of their first semester helped them with their studies; 73% of the respondents felt that the progress Bursary had encouraged them to do better in their study; and 95% would recommend the Progress Bursary to friends at other universities.

Websites

<http://www.uel.ac.uk/progress/>

<http://www.aspire-he.co.uk/>