CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

The First Year Experience in Continuing Education

Selection of conference papers
presented on 24/5th April 2006
at University of Stirling

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Contents: The First Year Experience in Continuing Education.

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The onset of the twenty-first century has brought a marked change in the role of Lifelong Learning/Continuing Education. As higher education has adapted to meet increasingly diverse demands from a more heterogeneous student population, lifelong learning departments have been required to adopt a wider institutional role enabling diverse learner needs to be met through enhanced flexibility of provision in its widest sense. This flexibility incorporates recruitment strategies, support mechanisms, modes and methods of delivery and assessment, and a range of exit strategies. Departments and schools delivering lifelong learning have thus adopted an expanded role both across campus and within the community at large, a role which has evolved alongside widening participation strategies and changing recruitment patterns such as increasing numbers of working and mature students.

One part of this wider lifelong learning role includes the provision of alternative entry routes to higher education, such as Access Courses and Summer Schools. In some cases this role includes widening participation through activities targeted at specific social groups. Therefore, for an ever-expanding section of society lifelong learning is becoming the public face of higher education while for an increasing number of potential students it is the first point of contact with HE, including taster courses and non-accredited provision targeting low participation communities and academic skills provision for those wishing to enter higher education through 'non traditional' routes.

Increasingly lifelong learning is being asked, or expected, to adopt a wider role with institutions viewing lifelong learning as the means of delivering flexible provision through evening and weekend classes, distance learning, workplace learning, e-learning, community based and outreach programmes.

What this means in practical terms is that lifelong learning fulfils an ever increasing, ever evolving, and an ever more mainstream role within higher education - no longer on the outside looking wistfully in.

The Institute of Education at the University of Stirling hosts that section of ESCalate responsible for ESCalate activity in relation to: widening participation; HE in FE; continuing education/lifelong learning. Stirling's current activities include: producing and disseminating resources for staff and students in Higher and Further Education; undertaking and disseminating research on policy and practice; supporting and advising on pedagogy, curriculum enhancement and staff development. In April 2006 the ESCalate conference, held at University of Stirling, brought together practitioners from across the globe including Australia, Ireland, United States, and Spain. The papers in this booklet are a selection from that event.

1. When your first year is also your last year: Retention and completion of Early Childhood Studies students with advanced standing

Mark O'Hara and Rosie Bingham: Sheffield Hallam University

Summary

This paper reviewed the outcomes to date of a collaborative project at Sheffield Hallam University to develop clear progression routes into higher education (HE) for further education (FE) students studying on Advanced Diploma, Higher National Certificate and Higher National Diploma courses in childcare and education. Since 2002, students from partnership colleges have been eligible for enrolment on the BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies degree at Sheffield Hallam, starting at Level 5 or Level 6, depending on previous attainment and performance at interview. While the numbers involved during the past four years have been small, student retention has been high and attainment has equalled that of their traditional entry colleagues. The results support the notion that it is possible to widen participation without lowering standards or suffering high rates of attrition but there are implications for students and staff alike

Keywords

Early Childhood Studies / widening participation / student experience / student retention / student attainment

Introduction

Sheffield Hallam University has been, for many years, an active participant in regional Access and Foundation networks and has developed a wide range of activities to raise awareness, offer guidance and provide taster courses for potential learners. Using HEFCE funding, the Building Pathways Partnership was created (O'Hara and Bingham, 2004) to develop a regional progression framework which was to be transparent, unambiguous and secure (Sheffield Hallam University, 2001).

The Building Pathways Team acted as broker to develop progression routes for those studying on early childhood courses leading to an Advanced Diploma (ADCE), Higher National Certificate (HNC) or a Higher National Diploma (HND), to progress on to the University's BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies (ECS) and BA (Hons) Early Years Education degrees. Students from partner colleges would be able to enter the full time degree at the start of either Year 2 or Year 3 depending on their entry qualifications and performance at interview. For some students therefore their first year would also be their last year.

Research design

Data on the students' experiences were sought in a number of ways. Attainment data obtained through the University's Student Information system were accompanied by First Destination returns. At the same time Building Pathways students past and present were contacted and asked whether they would be willing to take part in an interview to explore their experiences in more detail and depth. As one of the researchers was a senior member of the Early Childhood Studies course team, perceived differences in terms of social location between respondent and researcher might have inhibited responses and led to reluctance to disclose information. Furthermore male researchers interacting in some way with female research subjects are potentially presented with additional challenges, even where the research does not constitute a: 'deeply personal enquiry into sensitive gendered experiences' (Reinharz and Chase, 2003, p.79). In view of this the interviews were conducted by a female colleague unrelated to the degree. The individual nature of the interviews ensured that respondents' comments could be made confidentially and their anonymity could be preserved.

Whilst the conferment and First Destination data was essentially quantitative in nature, the products of the semi-structured interviews resulted in data that was complicated, resistant to conversion into numerical form and varied in levels of abstraction and relevance (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). The task therefore involved not simply textural description and accounts of events but also necessitated structural description in which an attempt was made to interpret and explain events (Moustakas, 1994). A key factor in the analysis and presentation of the data was that emergent understandings would need to be tested and alternative explanations considered. Negative or discrepant data would therefore have to be included and considered as part of the analysis (Cresswell, 2003).

First destination and conferment data

The numbers of students seeking to take advantage of the Building Pathways routes into the Early Childhood Studies (ECS) and Early Years QTS degrees has remained small since the project was launched in 2001. Eighteen students in total enrolled between 2001 and 2005. One of these enrolled on a teacher training route, the other seventeen sought places on ECS. Possible reasons why students were more likely to take advantage of routes into the ECS course are discussed elsewhere (O'Hara and Bingham, 2004).

The majority of the students that enrolled on ECS between 2001 and 2005 achieved degree classifications in the 2.2 and 2.1 categories. One student was awarded a 3rd and one a 1st. One student withdrew for personal reasons. See Figure 1 below for details; the number of Building Pathways students present within each cell is shown in parenthesis. The pattern of attainment is not dissimilar from that achieved by standard entry students in the same cohorts and may show a slightly better ratio between the 2.1 and 2.2 categories. The student taking the teacher training route was also awarded a 2.1.

Year	1st	2.1	2.2	3rd	Total
2002	0	10	16(1)	1(1)	27(2)
2003	2	10(3)	20(2)	0	32(5)
2004	4(1)	13(2)	17(1)	1	35(4)
2005	3	20(2)	20(3)	3	46(5)
Total	9(1)	53(7)	73(7)	5(1)	140(16)

Figure 1

Student attainment data for ECS studentsFirst
Destination data meanwhile showed that the majority of Building Pathways graduates from the early childhood degrees had continued with or embarked on careers or further study involving work with young children and/or their families.

Student	First Destination
A	Sure Start, Play Development Officer
B	Nursery Assistant
C	Working in overseas early childhood settings until 2006
D	No data received
E	Enrolled on PGCE 3-7 course
F	Enrolled on PGCE 3-7 course
G	Nursery Manager
H	Enrolled on PGCE 5-11 course
I	Head of Pre-school
J	Team Leader, Barclays
K	Sure Start Home Visitor & enrolled on PG.Cert in Child Psychology (PT)
L	Administrator
M	Enrolled on PGCE 3-7 course
N	No data received
O	Enrolled on PGCE 3-7 course
P	No data received
Q	Enrolled on PGCE 3-7 course
R	KS1 Teacher

Figure 2

First Destination data
Interview data
Analysis of the interview data suggested three issues in particular were important to the students. The first issue revolved around the relationship between theory and practice; the second issue centred on student support and assessment; the third issue concerned preparation and orientation for the transition to an HE learning environment.

Theory and practice
During the development stage FE tutors expressed concerns that the HNC/D knowledge base was more practically orientated and that the strong theoretical component of HE courses could put Building Pathways students at a disadvantage (O'Hara and Bingham, 2004). Once enrolled HE staff felt there was some evidence that theory – practice connections were proving difficult, with some students performing better in modules with a greater practical focus than those requiring more theoretical underpinning. However, the students did not identify this as a critical gap, although they acknowledged an initial concern that some work was *'above my head'*. By the final interview, all felt that they had coped well with the theory - one commented *'I quite enjoyed grappling with the more abstract theories and ideas'* and another felt her extensive practical experience had given her a good grounding on which to base theoretical understanding. In fact, the main issue was more related to concerns about students' academic writing, particularly around critical analysis and structuring an argument. Initially, the students *'went for volume and quantity, but their structuring and selecting to make an argument is weak'* (HE tutor). This echoed findings by Giove and Wade (2003) who identified similar issues around the academic skills of direct entrants. By the end of their course, the students acknowledged that they had had to quickly develop a more mature style of writing. One commented, *'I had to use language in a more sophisticated way, and learn to express myself better'*, while another remarked *'I quickly learned about critiquing information and presenting a line of argument and discussion'*. However, whilst academic writing did prove challenging, it was a challenge that students and staff rose to with some success.

Student support and assessment
Assessment emerged as both complex and challenging, although the outcomes illustrated how well students adapted and developed their personal learning strategies. FE colleagues were originally concerned about a potential assessment stumbling block, in that their students may not have experienced as wide a range of assessment methods, and that the level of support in tackling assignments would be less in an HE setting. One FE colleague was quite forthright, stating *'I sometimes think we are more supportive over*

assessment - and give more in the way of ideas and information to help the students do their assignments'. Interestingly, one student having entered HE at Level 5 stated that 'the college tried to help me, so as to be useful for university. They gave you all the information and told you what to include in essays. We were babied really, and so it wasn't useful in the end'. At the end of their course all the students commented on their anxiety over assessments, 'it was like being at sea without a sail, with no sense of direction', commented one student, while another reported 'we had less support with assignments, but perhaps that was better because it made me tackle it in my own way, so I understood what I was doing better'. Indeed, the students seem to have coped well with the variety of assessment and had clearly developed strategies to manage it, as evidenced by their achievements.

One particular issue around assessment related to those HND students making direct entry to Level 6. From the start, these students were faced with the challenge of hitting the ground running. Students said this created more pressure than anticipated, perhaps, as one student said 'because I didn't realise how degrees were graded'. Every mark received affected their degree classification, with no opportunity to learn from and rectify any weaknesses. In their final reflections on the course, those who entered at Level 6 felt they had been at a disadvantage, one remarked, 'I felt the pressure from the very first assignment', commented one, while another queried why some of the HND (i.e. Level 5) marks did not contribute to the degree classification.

Similarly, the demands and expectations surrounding the final dissertation/research project proved a particularly steep learning curve for these students. As FE courses included preparation for research modules this had not been anticipated as a problem. However, the students felt unprepared for such an important assessment and one commented that other students 'did a module in Level 5, [on research proposals] - we missed out'. Judging from their interview comments, it appeared that different FE Colleges might be offering differing experiences around research preparation. Only one student felt that she had coped with the dissertation well, whilst most reported struggling. This concern had also been identified in another subject group within the University (Giove and Wade, 2003) and the problem fed through to the admissions process, with HE admissions tutors subsequently raising the bar for direct entry to Level 6, from a majority of merits to a majority of distinctions. HND students whose academic profiles were not characterised by a majority of distinctions were counselled to enter at Level 5, to give themselves more time to reach the required level and a greater chance of being awarded higher degree classifications. The numbers are far too small to claim causality but this

modification has coincided with an improvement in final degree classifications. Student attainment data for direct entry to Level 6 shows a marked improvement in degree classifications from 2002 to 2003, and in spite of the challenges, all students since 2002 have achieved 2.2 or higher degree classifications. One student who had been guided to enter at Level 5 reported that 'I was initially upset and cross, but looking back at my experience and talking to others, I'm actually really grateful for the advice. It was the best thing for me because I needed the time to adjust to expectations and the level of skill needed'.

Preparation and orientation

Moving from high levels of staff contact and hands-on support (both academic and pastoral) to be found in FE settings to an HE environment in which there were staff concerns as to whether the students could develop as autonomous learners in the time available, raised concerns about the students' transition between these differing models of student support. However, the students felt that the HE academic tutoring system met their academic and pastoral support needs, and HE staff thought the students had not wanted 'spoon feeding', and had presented as determined, well motivated and possessed of a desire to succeed. The students were felt to have responded well to the need to become increasingly independent as learners, and although most had no previous experience of some of the HE learning and teaching approaches (particularly those within the Virtual Learning Environment), one student summed it up as 'we just got on with it and did our best with new things'. Another reflected that 'the course has had more internet/conference based work/modules which have been different though not difficult to adapt to'. These students were not 'troubled by the responsibility given to them for their own learning and task completion' (Rhodes et al, 2002, p139), they rose to the challenge.

The students' motivation and determination was strengthened by the relationships that developed within the group. This was identified as a powerful support mechanism, particularly in the early stages of the course. One student acknowledged she 'sometimes felt intimidated at first, feeling a bit inadequate and thinking the others were cleverer', while another observed that 'other students had had two years of being together and it was hard to break into already formed groups'. The Building Pathways students helped each other come to grips with the 'bewilderment of information, systems, libraries, e-learning, buildings…' and identified this as an informal process which could usefully be more formalised with future intakes. They particularly welcomed the variety of group-based tasks within the curriculum as one mechanism which helped their successful integration with their peers and increased self-confidence.

In their final reflections, students commented that their FE experience could generally have been better geared towards preparing them for an HE environment. The FE tutors had already expressed some reservations about how well they could prepare their students, with one echoing the findings of a previous study (Rhodes et al, 2002) with the observation that *'I don't think we're all very clear about HE expectations, so may find it more difficult to prepare the students'*. Research suggests that 'good preparation for study in Higher Education is a major contributor to effective independent studying and is therefore a key ingredient of a good student experience' (Tait and Godfrey, 2001, p264). This question of preparation seemed a crucial one for the students and they offered many positive suggestions to address the problem (e.g. mentoring, booklets for prospective students). However, none felt that a bridging module as had been suggested by some HE colleagues was the solution. It must be acknowledged that the students also had some reservations about how well informed HE tutors were about the HNC/D routes, one respondent remarked that in her opinion one tutor *'had no idea of all the experience we'd had with children.'* When reflecting on their course as a whole, the students felt their practical experience could have been used more and valued more highly in their HE modules. Their final reflection on the course was that in retrospect, all felt that their practical experience gave them an advantage over their traditional entry colleagues in certain areas of the curriculum, a point recognised by HE staff.

Watt and Peterson (2000, p109) have argued that 'non-traditional students may need more support and information than traditional students' and the planning team had speculated on cohort mortality as a result of possible financial, employment and/or domestic difficulties that might impede or preclude students' from completing their degrees. However to date, only one of the Building Pathways entrants has been forced to temporarily withdraw as a result of this kind of pressure. This is undoubtedly due in no small part to both the grit and determination of the students themselves and the quality and level of support from staff on their courses.

Finally, students confounded doubters concerned about their lack of self-confidence (a key factor in achievement). Initially this concern seemed borne out by student interviews on arrival in HE, when all the participants articulated anxieties about the new learning environment and the expectations of the University. However this anxiety soon dissipated and by the time of follow up interviews six months later students were much more at home. One HE tutor described them as *'confident, bubbly and lively'*. As for the students themselves, all were adamant that they had made the right decision to progress to HE and felt that the experience had been a positive one. Many felt that they had achieved more than they themselves expected. One acknowledged that *'I didn't know what to expect and so felt out of my depth to begin with. However, I soon realised I could, and would, do this - and I have!'*

Conclusions

Albeit with the best of intentions, the planning team for this project may on occasion have operated a deficit model of the students, a model in which they were sometimes viewed as potentially disadvantaged in relation to their traditional entry peers. But this was only part of the picture. To begin with, sensitive but realistic recruitment is important; setting people up to fail benefits no-one. Secondly, these students have advantages as well as disadvantages not least their resilience, experience and determination; they need to be allowed to play to these strengths where possible. Thirdly, high quality academic tutoring and other support can do much to ameliorate any initial culture shock and to narrow any skills gaps that exist; it is important therefore to be clear about who does what. Fourthly even the most cursory of cost-benefit analyses suggests that we need to seek economies of scale rather than choosing bespoke approaches. Dividing the development costs by eighteen makes clear the need to avoid reinventing the wheel every time. Fifthly the ground is constantly shifting underneath us and consequently building pathways is likely to require mechanisms and champions that will keep the routes into HE relevant as well as clear.

FE and HE staff involved in this work have learnt a great deal since the project's inception and the latest interviews and student attainment data point the way to further developments. These include FE students having access to past HE assignments and course work prior to application and entry, additional learning support, peer support from previous students and bridging programmes. These and other ideas will continue to be developed to improve the University's provision for widening participation in this area. In the meantime FE students and their tutors now have access to clearly identifiable progression routes for early years students. For its part, the HEI has been able to enrol a series of dedicated, experienced students who have made a valuable contribution to the life and health of their courses and whose burning desire to succeed has been an example to all. Finally, their achievements speak for themselves; far from dumbing down and lowering educational standards, these students have demonstrated that with the right support and guidance they are capable of achieving results at least as good as those achieved by students enrolling on the University's early years degrees through traditional entry.

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2. Student retention and strategies for success: expectations, study habits and attitudes among students who stay

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Summary
This paper describes the findings of a study exploring the relationship between students' expectations of higher education and their experience once at university. Students whose expectations had been met were less likely to have considered withdrawing, while those who had contemplated leaving were likely to have had unrealistic expectations in a range of areas, in particular regarding interactions with academic staff. Accurate expectations were also associated with good self-reported adjustment to university and with effective study habits. Among this group of students, satisfaction appeared to relate to the meeting of expectations as well as actual experience. Students whose orientation to university was based on subject interest and career goals were also less likely to consider leaving and more likely to feel highly motivated. Where the decision to enter higher education was prompted by the desires of parents and/or teachers, consideration of withdrawal was higher and motivation lower

Keywords
Retention / persistence / withdrawal / adjustment / expectations / transformation

Background
Many students who withdraw from higher education state that they entered university with 'inaccurate expectations', or that their expectations of higher education were not met. 34% of informants quoted by Aldridge and Rowley (2001), 43% of those quoted by Baird (2003), and the majority of students surveyed by May and Bousted (2003), cited reasons relating to their expectations as having contributed to their decision to leave. These factors were also cited by many witnesses interviewed for a 2001 government report on student retention (DfES 2001).

Just as inaccurate expectations are associated with drop-out, realistic expectations are related to student success (Mackie 1998:16, Yorke 1999:14). Ozga and Sukhnandan explored this issue in depth, and concluded that preparedness was 'key' in determining whether or not a student would persist. Unmet expectations appear to be closely related to another frequently-named reason for student withdrawal, 'poor choice of course'. This latter was cited as a key issue by Davis and Elias (2003), and was found to be named as a factor in the decision to depart by between 25% and 79% of leavers in a range of studies (Round 2004:22). A small study in the [then] School of Informatics at Northumbria University found that both of these issues were named by many withdrawing students.

Four dimensions of student expectations were explored in the larger study of which some findings are reported here. These are as follows:
- Expectations about what university is like: workloads, academic demands, social relations, physical environment, 'institutional cultures' etc.
- Expectations about what one does and/or gets at university: day-to-day routines, the 'minutiae' of following a course, support from academic and non-academic staff etc.
- Expectations about what university is for: reasons for entering higher education and for selecting a particular institution and course.
- Expectations about how students themselves will change: what or who will the student become during and after his/her course?

All of these aspects are, of course, interconnected. This paper examines some of the relationships between expectations, withdrawal and adjustment, and identifies some key links.

The study
Questionnaires were mailed to first-year students studying full-time on three undergraduate programmes at Northumbria University. These programmes were chosen to disciplines with a balance between 'traditional academic' content and a strong vocational focus. Two were in Business Studies and one was in Computing.

Students who had completed their first year and planned to continue with their programme of study were surveyed during the summer vacation of 2004. Only UK home students were included, and all of the students who returned the questionnaire were aged 24 or under. The data can therefore be regarded as representative of a reasonably homogenous group.

65 usable questionnaires were received, representing a 21% return. In addition, six students agreed to take part in short interviews exploring the issues raised in the questionnaires in greater depth.

63% of students in the study were female and 37% were male. 63% represented the first generation of their family to go to university, a figure almost identical to that for Northumbria University as a whole. On the basis of data

provided by the students, around 33% were judged to come from 'lower social class backgrounds'.

Respondents were asked to report the accuracy of their expectations about various aspects of academic and social life at university. They were also asked to assess their levels of adjustment and satisfaction with these. In addition, they were presented with a number of items relating to their academic orientation, and attitudes to study. A further section asked them to recall their reasons for choosing to enter higher education, Northumbria University, and their current course. Other questions asked them to provide information about their attendance, private study habits, and motivation.

Considering withdrawal and academic adjustment
Students were asked to indicate whether they had 'seriously considered' withdrawing from their course of study. 25% stated that they had 'seriously considered withdrawing', a figure which appears high when it is recalled that all of these students did in fact complete the first year and planned, at the time of the survey, to progress to the second.

Students were asked to indicate the reasons why they eventually decided to stay at university. The most common responses were 'I began to enjoy my course more', 'I got support from my friends or family which helped me to stay', 'I couldn't think of a different course to do' and 'my career aims had not changed'.

A number of items relating to adjustment were also put to students, and the answers to these indicate that most feel they have adjusted well to university. 76.2% strongly agreed or agreed that they had adjusted well to the academic demands of their course, while 81% self-reported good social adjustment. 66.2% strongly agreed or agreed that they felt they 'really belonged at university', while 70.8% strongly agreed or agreed that they had 'really enjoyed' their course so far. In all cases, the majority of students who did not strongly agree or agree with these items stated that they neither agreed nor disagreed, rather than disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Students who had considered leaving university were more likely to state that they neither agreed nor disagreed with these items than to express either agreement or disagreement, but a substantial minority in each case strongly agreed or agreed. Relatively few disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Expectations about 'what university is like'
Students were asked to evaluate their expectations about the workload on their course, the academic demands involved, and academic staff. Students who had considered withdrawing from university were more

likely than students who did not consider withdrawing to have underestimated the weight of both workload and academic demands, and to have had unrealistic expectations about academic staff, as shown in tables 1a and 1b.
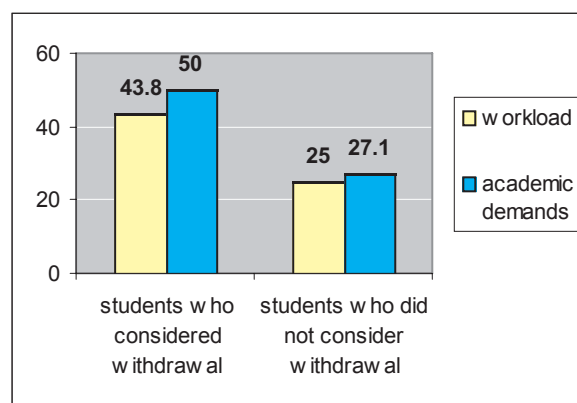
Table 1a: Student self-report of expectations: percentage of students who found workload or academic demands heavier than they had expected
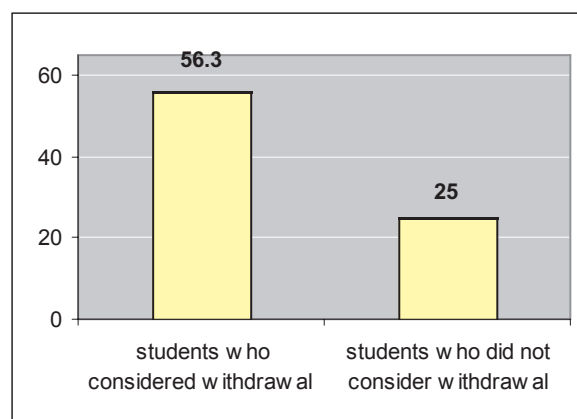
Table 1b: Student self-report of expectations: percentage of students whose expectations about academic staff were *mistaken*

In addition, students' self-report of the quality of their adjustment to university is related to the accuracy of their expectations in these areas. Because very few students state that their academic adjustment is 'poor', this group have been excluded from the following discussion. However, the contrast between students who strongly agreed or agreed with the item 'I have adjusted well to the academic demands of university'and those who neither agreed nor disagreed with this item can be seen from the figures in table 2. Students who reported good academic adjustment were also significantly more likely to state that their expectations about academic staff were accurate.

Students who stated that they felt they 'really belong' at university were also more likely to have had accurate expectations about both workload and academic demands, as shown in table 3. Students who agree with

the 'belonging' item are also more likely to have had accurate expectations about the academic staff they would meet at university; 74.4% state that their expectations were accurate, as opposed to only 54.5% of students who neither agree nor disagree or disagreed or strongly disagreed with the 'belonging' item.
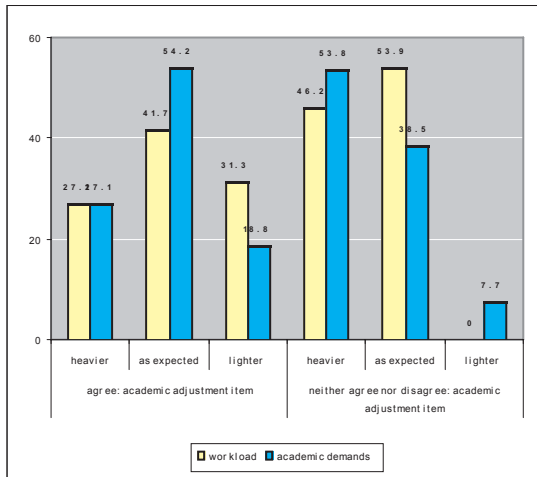
Table 2: Student self-report of their expectations of workload and academic demands, grouped by self-reported quality of adjustment
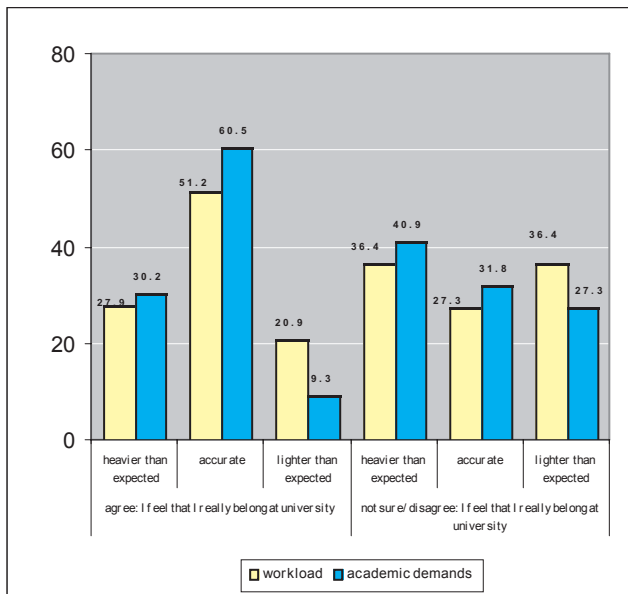
Table 3: Student self-report of their expectations of workload and academic demands, grouped by self-reported feelings of belonging

Expectations about what one will 'do' or 'get' at university
The findings in the previous section are interesting, but on the basis of this small sample of students most are not statistically significant. A stronger correlation is found between expectations about the 'practical details' of university life and both adjustment and commitment to persistence.

Students who did not consider leaving are significantly more likely to have had accurate expectations about both academic and non-academic support, as shown by the figures in table 4.
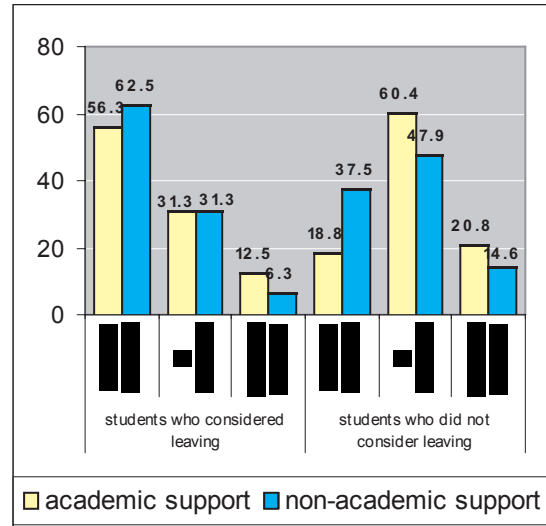
Table 4: Student self-report of expectations about academic support and non-academic support

Students who did not consider leaving were also more likely to have had accurate expectations about the amount of one-to-one contact with academic staff and about the teaching methods that they would encounter in higher education. By contrast, commitment to staying at university does not appear to be related to students' expectations about the study habits which they would need at university, the need to be an independent learner, or the content of their course. The most important area of expectations for persistence, therefore, would appear to be *interactions with university staff*. The importance of *quality of interactions* has frequently been identified in the literature on student retention, but it appears that the frame within which the student places these interactions is also important.

Expectations about 'day to day' life at university were also compared with students' self-report of the quality of their adjustment. Students who felt that they had adjusted well were found to be slightly more likely to have had accurate expectations about the amount of academic support they would encounter, and also about teaching methods.

Once again, expectations about interactions were important. However, expectations about one-to-one contact and non-academic support did not appear to be related to adjustment. It may be that these were of greater importance to students who had encountered some kind of 'critical incident' which caused them to contemplate withdrawing, and therefore to seek individual help from staff.

Students who felt that their adjustment was good were significantly more likely to have had accurate expectations about the kind of study habits they would need at university and also about the need to be an independent learner. This suggests that good adjustment depends partly on expectations about interactions, but also on expectations about what one will have to do *oneself* to succeed at university.

Satisfaction also appears to relate to expectations. No differences emerged between students on the three different courses surveyed in their responses to the various items which addressed issues of satisfaction. This might be expected were satisfaction dependent solely on actual experience. However, students' judgement of the quality of various aspects of their course relates directly to their expectations. Tables 5a and 5b show the significant relationships between expectations about workload and academic demands and self-reported experience of these during the first year.

Table 5b: Student self-report of the accuracy of their expectations about academic demands, separated by judgement of academic demands in their first year

Students with accurate expectations about these issues also self-reported better attendance and a higher number of hours spent in private study.

Expectations may not be the causal factor here. Students who are more academically oriented, motivated, and predisposed to spend their time on activities to do with education may be more willing to take proactive steps towards finding out about university before they arrive. Therefore these may actually be characteristics of students who are likely to 'gain' accurate expectations. If this is the case, the 'policy response' would still be to encourage *all* students to behave like this group of students and furnish themselves with expectations which are as accurate as possible.

In all cases, however, accurate expectations about what the student him/herself will be expected to do correlate with a cluster of attitudes and behaviours which appear likely to foster student success. Expectations about workload do not seem to be related to these issues, which suggests that factors 'on the borderline' between 'what should I *do*?' and 'who should I *be*?' at university are the most important.

Table 5a: Student self-report of the accuracy of their expectations about workload, separated by judgement of workload in their first year

A similar relationship is found in the case of expectations about 'day to day' aspects of university life. It appears that student satisfaction may relate to how closely experience matches expectations, as well as to the actual quality of the experience.

Expectations and academic orientation
Some correlations also appeared between expectations in three key areas and the academic orientation, motivation and study habits of students. Those who had had accurate expectations about the academic demands of their course, about the study habits which they would need, and about the need to be an independent learner, were more likely to provide responses which indicated high levels of motivation and intellectual curiosity.

Expectations about what university is for – entry decisions
Students were asked to report on their motivations for decisions prior to entry. This section was split into three parts, which sought information about the decision to enter higher education, the decision to come to Northumbria University (not discussed here), and the choice of programme of study.

Students who named subject interest as a reason for choosing to enter higher education (53.8% of the sample) were significantly more likely to provide answers which indicated high levels of motivation and academic orientation, and were significantly less likely to have considered withdrawal. They also reported significantly longer hours spent in private study than students for whom subject interest only became relevant at the point of course selection, or who did not name subject interest at any stage.

Students who regard the university course as 'training' for a job showed slightly lower academic orientation and motivation, but this effect was minimal. However, students who stated that they had entered higher education because their teachers and/or family wanted them to do so showed lower motivation and academic orientation, and also spent less time in private study.

While students who chose their course because they thought that it would enable them to get a 'well paid' job were slightly more likely than others to consider dropping out, career focus is related to lower consideration of withdrawal. Students who entered their course because they wanted to get a specific type of job or because they wanted to improve their general job prospects were significantly less likely to have considered withdrawal than students for whom this factor was not important.

A cluster of reasons for entry appear to be related to good study habits and commitment to persistence. Interest in a particular subject and/or a particular type of work appear to operate for students who do not consider leaving. In addition, liking the subject studied relates to a cluster of study habits and attitudes which should foster student success. This increased involvement in one's academic life may 'feed back' into sustained enjoyment of the course. Career focus on the part of the student also helps to build commitment. However students who have entered university largely because of someone else's desires or expectations are vulnerable both to poor study habits and to withdrawal. This confirms the frequent finding that 'reactive entrants' to university are among the most likely to drop out (Ozga and Sukhnandan 1998:321, Davis and Elias 2003:iv).

Interview findings: student 'good practice'
Only a small number of interviews were carried out, but these provided some insights into the types of activity which foster student satisfaction and success. All of the students who volunteered to take part in an interview were, by coincidence, both highly successful and highly satisfied students, who were enthusiastic about their studies and the university. Two were among the oldest students in the study, and had entered university via slightly 'non-standard' routes. All but one self-identified as both first generation and lower-class.

All of the students interviewed had undertaken some research into their course before making a firm choice. This involved not only reading the university prospectus and attending open days, but also telephoning academic staff and seeking information from current students, where this was possible. One interviewee had enrolled on a 'taster' course at Northumbria University and stated that this had led him to change from his initial selection of programme.

The students described a set of highly effective study habits. Crucially, these involved working consistently throughout the academic year, 'keeping up' with reading of one's own notes and of recommended secondary sources, and an intellectual curiosity about the subject 'outside' the minimum required to pass. They were clear about the need for effective time management and felt that by and large they had achieved this during their first year; all but one had combined this with a part-time job. For all of these students, the course was clearly at the centre of their life, and they defined themselves primarily as 'students'.

All of the interviewees spoke of the importance of becoming independent in one's approach to learning and also in one's life as a student 'outside the classroom'. They all recognised the need to shed secondary school culture, and in most cases had been enthusiastic about doing this. All were career focussed, although this did not necessarily include an idea about which particular jobs they would apply for. Rather, they might be described as wanting to become 'employable' in general terms, while keeping their precise career choices open.

Perhaps the most important shared characteristic of these students was their willingness to accept change in themselves and to embrace flexibility. Several spoke of the 'university experience' or of their desire to have 'new experiences' at university. Two explained that they had embarked on parts of their programme which they had not expected to encounter or had initially disliked in a spirit of challenge. For one student, the element of the course about which she had been least enthusiastic was now her favourite part. An openness to transformation appeared to be important; one expectation which should be encouraged in students is to 'expect the unexpected'.

Conclusions
It appears that students who have realistic expectations about university are more likely to feel satisfied with their course, to adjust well to higher education, and to be committed to persisting. Students are less likely to consider dropping out if they have realistic expectations about the wider culture of the university and about the type and extent of interactions with staff which they will encounter. Good adjustment appears to depend on realistic expectations in these areas, and also about

what students themselves will be expected to do on a day-to-day basis.

In addition, students are likely to adjust well to university and to commit to their course if they have a strong subject and/or career orientation when they make their initial higher education choices. 'Reactive entrants' are less likely to make effective adjustments and to commit to higher education, while students who take an active part in selecting their course are likely to be satisfied and to persist. An important expectation among highly successful students is the expectation that they themselves will change, and that they will encounter some things at university which they had not expected.

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3. FE-HE Transition in West London: The first year experience & retention

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Summary
West London Aimhigher, co-funded by Westminster University, is undertaking action research to help improve retention in partnership institutions. Research indicates that induction and the first term are crucial for retaining students.

This paper will investigate three strategies in place to prepare students for their first year in West London Aimhigher institutions: a three-day intensive bridging course piloted by Westminster University, the Thames Valley University (TVU) Academic Study Strategies module and the study skills Preparation for HE course piloted at Hammersmith & West London College (HWLC). Where the Westminster programme sets out to provide students with an overview of the skills required to survive the first year, the TVU and HWLC programmes are delivered to year 12 and 13 students either in the HEI or the FEC to develop the skills necessary for achieving at HE. Students are also prepared for what to expect and the realities of HE.

Keyword
FE-HE transition / first year experience / induction / retention / academic study skills

Raising aspirations about Higher Education (HE) has been the focus of Aimhigher and HE institutions for about five years now. Ensuring those aspirations are realised is rather more difficult. Research suggests that about 17% of students withdraw from HE in their first year, most in the first six months or shortly after Christmas. With two-thirds of students moving from Further Education (FE) into HE, the consequences for the individual, their family and the Higher Education Institution (HEI) are quite significant. In response to these findings, Westminster University spearheaded discussions between FE and HE through the university's Associate College Programme which in turn led to a jointly funded project with West London Aimhigher to investigate the student experience in the transition from Further to Higher Education.

From the various discussions between FE and HE staff, it emerged that:
1. There is no longer a 'traditional' student to be catered for which is supported by the reasons students, both sixth form and FE, give for dropping out. The two groups also bring different strengths to their studies, invariably the strengths of the one group being the weakness of the other. This means that students should therefore be treated as individually as possible, taking into account the constraints facing HE.
2.. There is a correlation between students entering with higher grades tending to stay on at HE. This is due more to the skills they have when they enter HE, than the impact of the teaching. The introduction of key skills and other routes into HE, other than the traditional GCSE and A Level has raised questions over equivalents especially with regard to Maths and English which carry a minimum C grade at GCSE.
3. Good practice is prevalent in all institutions but it needs to be clearly identified and shared. This came through in various case studies which were presented

at the discussion forums.
4. Staff and students need clearer information earlier than what they currently receive which can only come through closer collaboration between FE and HE.
5. Concerning the student's actual experience, FE and HE staff determined that the biggest difference between the two sectors is the support students receive at FE through tutorial systems which disappear when the student gets to HE. This finding led to the next stage of research which was to track some students who had moved from FE into one of the three London West HEIs. The purpose of the tracking was to confirm, from the students' perspective, what the issues affecting retention and achievement were and when, and how, best to intervene.

The main findings included: Information overload at induction, too many assumptions being made about what students knew, for example the modular and credit system and where to get help. Another major factor for students was the isolation they felt when they did not know anyone in their course and having to walk into a lecture theatre of 350 plus people. In other words, students felt unprepared for the cultural and social changes they felt.

When asked how these hurdles could be overcome, the students were slightly divided between 'just having to adapt and make the most of it' and suggesting interventions. The ideas for intervention were put to the HEIs and FECs and a discussion forum was convened which included the student voice (both HE and FE). The outcome of the discussion forum was a series of recommendations or a wish-list which each institution undertook to action during this year. Some of the recommendations were to continue interventions which

had been implemented as the student suggestions filtered through and it is these which are discussed in this paper.

The Westminster bridging programme was divided into two separate, but related, parts – the first was a Pre-Induction afternoon delivered the week before the main programme where students met each other socially and were allocated a buddy if they had requested one. The second part was a three-day intensive course which focused on academic study skills and how to find your way around the university. It was based on the Winter Preparation for Learning Programme which had been developed by the Academic Writing Unit and was delivered by staff, both teaching and support, from FE and HE. During the programme, buddies were in attendance to help out and to answer questions that students might have.

Before attending the programme, students were asked to complete a number of forms and to read through the handbook. In hindsight, this proved an invaluable move as the pre-reading allowed staff to focus on the main points with students having the notes for reinforcement.

The Westminster Bridging course was a short, intensive intervention and the one we are tracking most rigorously in terms of methodology. The others are longer variations. Thames Valley (TVU) has taken the Academic Study Strategies module from an accredited study skills programme and made it available through Aimhigher to partner institutions. Where the Westminster programme has only been run once in its current form, the TVU one is now in its third round. It is an accredited module which is 45 hours long with two formal assessment points. The students go to the university campus for the sessions at a time negotiated by the Level 3 institution and the university. Comparing the three groups has raised some interesting points which will require further investigation.

The first time the module was run, it needed to be scaled down due to the much lower than expected uptake by students in the FEC. Evaluations of the module were positive, however, student retention and achievement on the course was lower than expected. All students who were retained achieved. The reason why students did not stay the course was the fact that they had to travel 30 minutes by tube to the university on their free afternoon and there was some Saturday attendance which interfered with employment commitments.

The next course was a joint FE/6th form session on a Wednesday afternoon. The FE students were from the same college but different sites, one close to the university and the other close to the 6th form (30minutes away). The number of students who expressed an interest was higher than the number who attended due to the timing of the sessions. The students attending from the 6th form, however, proved more reliable in turning up for classes, which suggests that travel is partly a problem, but not totally. This has been reinforced by the current module group who are from a 6th form a short bus ride away. Attendance has been excellent despite the sessions being voluntary and from 2-5pm on a Friday afternoon.

Looking at the nature of the three groups: the FE students and local 6th form students are very similar in terms of ethnicity, background, vocational orientation, GCSE profile, age and language needs which tends to suggest that there are other factors affecting student motivation and commitment which are related to the type of institution they are from. Some form of analysis of the students who attended the different TVU courses with those who attended the Westminster three-day intensive (all FE but variable age) will now be undertaken, to ascertain any other areas that can be addressed to aid retention and achievement. Using the Westminster group as a comparative is valid as students travelled across London to attend and stayed the entire course (only 2/35 did not complete, having indicated their indecision upfront).

Of the students who attended the first TVU module, two went onto Westminster University and attended the Bridging Course. Those who attended the second one are now in their final year at college and are going to university next year, feeling more confident about what is required of them. The module has helped them in their current academic work – the extent of which will be determined following an evaluation of their performance/value added profile – keeping in mind the other interventions/factors which may have also had a bearing on their progress.

A variation which developed from the first TVU course was to deliver a version of the academic study strategies module in-house at the college. This decision was supported by a suggestion from a previous student who recommended that the Key Skills Communications course be adapted more to university academic requirements and be renamed. Time-tabling the programme has proven to be a problem, because, although two hours a week were found, they were on the busiest day of the week for the A level students which was where the programme was being piloted for historical reasons. The programme was opened up to students from other courses and one AVCE Science student took up the offer. Problems, such as staffing and continuation of ideas have emerged as the co-ordinator left the role just before implementation resulting in the proposed programme being delivered in diluted form.

The main element which was omitted was the inclusion

of HE academics to reinforce certain points and to provide students with a clearer picture of what to expect when they get to HE. The need for the realistic picture and managing aspirations emerged as important through other Aimhigher activities where students thought they would not have to read books at university or wanted to apply for courses such as medicine when their grades were never going to meet the requirements. There are, however as with the other projects, positive lessons to be drawn. The students who have managed to see most of the course through (6/12) have found it beneficial. As with the students who attended the TVU courses, the value added impact is currently being investigated.

The course should be run again next year, open to even more students at Levels 3 and 4 – discussions are in progress to see if a timetable solution can be found as the skills development on the programme and its flexible nature (drop in workshops) benefit Level 3 studies too. An added benefit would be to use the course to achieve the Level 3 Key Skills Communications portfolio, however, this is not possible at present as the college policy is to embed the key skills into the subject delivery. This remains as option, but in the interim, the students who successfully complete the programme should be able to obtain OCN accreditation.

A derivative of the programme has been fed into the induction programme of the HND business course and as an optional but integrated module on the Certificate in Education, both of which have proven to be most successful in terms of retention and achievement. The Business Division took a whole-course approach with staff development sessions using materials specially developed taking place before the students were enrolled, while on the Certificate in Education, the module, although optional, was delivered to all teachers in the first semester and was integrated into the content module sessions. The impact as measured by the external verifier comments has been improved standards of academic writing and better integration of theory and referencing. In addition, fewer demands have been placed on the tutors for academic support than in previous years. The impact of a similar approach with A Level students at another FEC, using the tutorial session for HE preparation is to be assessed before students move onto HE.

So, what are the lessons to be learnt from the research and interventions to date?
1. Students have a need to belong and inductions still need to become more student friendly. One way HEIs are doing this is to look at induction as a year-long process, rather than the first two weeks. The strong anecdotal success of Westminster's social event and buddy scheme suggests that this is an initiative to develop.

2. As other research has shown, students react to new situations in different ways. It needs to be acknowledged that some students 'just manage' while others need more support and guidance. The successes of the bridging and academic study skills programmes prove this, however
3. More research needs to be undertaken to work out how best to reach students in terms of timing to best match student need and institutional influences. The investigations referred to above will be published by end July 2006.
4. Continue with the current interventions which are proving successful (even before students move onto HE) and compile case studies to further help students prepare for the transition.
5. Continue the dialogue between FE and HE. With the formation of Lifelong Learning Networks, this dialogue should become easier and in West London, the effects of FE-HE collaboration are already being seen which will benefit the student and enhance retention in the first year at HE.

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4. Student to student mentoring as an aid to achievement and retention

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Summary
Many factors effect achievement and retention. (Yorke, 2000).
 A crucial element is what happens in the first term and first year. (Bousted and May, 2003). Many Continuing Education students feel happier telling their feelings to their peers rather than their tutors and prefer to get initial help and reassurance that way. Student to student mentoring schemes can build on this. This paper explores the issues involved in setting up and running a student to student mentoring scheme.

Keywords
Student to student mentoring / mentee / mentor / retention / achievement

Introduction
"Access to Higher Education is not only a matter of getting into University. It is also a matter of staying in and emerging in good standing." (Select Committee on Education and Employment, Sixth report.2001).

Continuing Education students face many problems and issues that could effect their ability to stay the course and achieve their potential. Student to student mentoring schemes are one way we can help them in their quest for fulfilment.

Many Continuing Education students feel happier telling their feelings to their peers rather than their tutors and prefer to get initial help and reassurance that way. Continuing Education staff can build on this by introducing a student mentoring scheme to their courses as one key element of the support infrastructure. As Anderson says:
"The best prediction of success is students` motivation. Support services need to clarify and build on motivation and address motivation-diminishing issues." (Anderson, E. 2003).

Using student mentors is one way of achieving this. This paper will explore the issues involved in setting up and running a student to student mentoring scheme.

What is mentoring?
A classic definition of mentoring within the context of Higher Education is "a one to one supportive relationship between the student and another person of greater ability, achievement or experience". (Topping, 1996)

A student mentor can advise on the hidden curriculum, encourage personal growth, help the mentee optimise academic achievement, aid the mentee in staying the course and act as a sounding board for them. By providing help and support in all these areas, student mentoring schemes can provide one way of achieving the goal of student satisfaction in their learning journey. The mentor can be there for the new student to help this

time be a positive and life enhancing experience.

Setting up and running the scheme
Anyone setting up a scheme needs to have passion for the concept of mentoring. This passion will be conveyed to and taken up by your mentors and mentees and will help ensure your scheme's success.

The initial step is to write a handbook for mentors This handbook should describe the role of the mentor, give advice on carrying out the role of the mentor, and offer sources of support. It should include details of all the help available to students so that a mentor can pass this on to their mentee, thus providing part of Bousted and May's 'ongoing induction' (Bousted, M and May, S. 2003) Owen (2002) states that a good induction programme is essential for students but it can provide an overload of information which may be forgotten in the first months. Mentors can be a way of keeping all this new information alive in the minds of the mentees.

Once the handbook is in place, you can recruit the mentors from the second year of your course. Often, the best way to do this is to visit the groups of second year students to explain the scheme and its advantages for both the year two and year one student. Ask for volunteers to take part in the scheme.

Following this, a training session should be run for the mentors, based around the handbook. Both the training and the handbook should emphasise the boundaries and responsibilities of the role. If your institution has a Tutor handbook, this should also be given to the mentors as much useful information from this can be passed on to the mentee., who will often listen and absorb information from a fellow student when they have missed it from staff.

Mentors should be told that they must treat the role in a professional manner, as they would treat a full time job, and that they must keep written records of all contact. They should be told that they must not do their mentees` work for them, i.e. they must not write assignments for

them but can give advice in the planning stage and may advise on draft work.

While you are running these training sessions, you can select your mentees. Early identification of 'at risk' students is essential for their retention and achievement (Johnstone, 1997). Together with your course team, select the students you feel would benefit from having a mentor. Present the idea of a mentor to them in a one to one meeting, emphasising the positive benefits. Mentoring should not be seen as remedial, but as a positive, enjoyable and enlightening experience. As such, it should be a voluntary activity so if a student declines to have a mentor, do not force the issue. There could be many students in your groups who could benefit from having a mentor, including first generation university students, mature students, second language home students, late entrants, single parents, refugees and international students. This list is not exhaustive but gives a good indication of possible mentees.

Careful pairing of mentor and mentee is needed. Use your course team here, especially the personal tutor. Putting together two foreign or home students who speak the same second language can inspire the mentee with fresh confidence and insights into the course but may prevent them practising their English. Use your experience to judge what is best for your students.

Set up and facilitate an initial meeting for all pairs in a large room. Get the pairs started on the suggested questions you have identified in your handbook and step back to observe. Watch for any personality clashes or other problems and be prepared to intervene if necessary. However, the aim is to let the students negotiate their own agenda for meetings and for what they want from the experience. The objective is for the mentoring to continue across the whole of the first year, with an emphasis on most help in term one. Support your mentors across the academic year and ensure that they do not take on any mentee problems themselves.

Views of mentors and mentees
Results from interviews of mentors and mentees on student mentoring schemes run by the author reveal the following.

Mentees all reported that they felt they had benefited greatly from mentor help. Their study techniques had improved and they felt they had a better understanding of the course than many of their peers. Their self confidence had also improved. They felt that they had settled into college life quicker than many of their fellow students "It was all very helpful, both with the assignments and settling into the course". They learnt the college and course conventions and culture through their mentors: "Useful and helpful. My mentor has also

given me the lowdown on the lecturers, what they are like, what sort of feedback they give and what not to say to them". Mentees often go on to be mentors in year two, wanting to give something back for all the help they gained.

Mentors all reported enjoying the role, together with a gain in self confidence and self esteem. The most interesting result was the academic benefits experienced by the mentors. They felt their own studies had profited from their increased focus on study skills and techniques, with their second year assignments benefiting from revisiting the year one topics with their mentees. Having to explain aspects of the course had given them fresh insights into why they were studying it themselves. The process had enabled mentors to observe and realise their own academic progression and maturation during the course of the year, inspiring them to greater things in their next year. Mentors noted the academic and other benefits they gave their mentees. "I was able to pass on my knowledge of the course and college, and give other less obvious advice and tips, such as what I thought tutors were expecting of her."

Qualities of a mentor
The author's research with Foundation degree students (Hampton, D and Blythman, M in Beaney, P (Ed), forthcoming) reveal the following qualities to be the qualities they thought were needed by a good mentor:
- good knowledge of the course and college
- being approachable
- good listening skills
- being motivating
- patience
- honesty and trustworthiness
- being hard working
- helpfulness
- friendliness
- having time for the mentee as a person
- being encouraging and
- intelligence.

Implementation difficulties and strategies to overcome them
One difficulty that may be faced is hostility from colleagues. This may be overcome in various ways. Firstly, find a champion in your institution. The more senior this person is, the better. Secondly, you can use a case study approach to show how your mentoring schemes have helped retention and achievement. Thirdly, raise awareness of your mentoring schemes and their successes wherever possible, for example at university/college academic meetings, course committee meetings and staff development sessions. Your champion can be a great help with this. Fourthly, conduct research into the results of your schemes and publish your results. Quote the research of others in this area.

Fifthly, start or join a network of staff who are also running such schemes or have an interest in such schemes for Continuing Education students. Sixthly, the handbooks that you write for your mentors and mentees will form another way of raising awareness generally within and outside your organisation. These handbooks will also crystallise the main ideas of such a scheme for other staff. Finally, make use of your successes in other schemes within your institution. For example, you may have set up a successful personal academic tutorial system which has been shown to help retention and aid fulfilment of student potential. Build on all this success and the good reputation that you have gained from it to gain acceptance of your mentoring scheme.

A second difficulty that you may encounter is in getting the mentees. In the experience of the author, this can be the most problematic possible difficulty. You can ask your year one personal academic tutors to choose the mentees who would benefit from a mentoring scheme. Unfortunately, this strategy relies on the calibre of your colleagues. A better solution is to read all the tutorial records for your year one students on the courses you wish to support with such a scheme. From these you should be able to find the possible mentees. Discuss these people with their personal academic tutors and the rest of the course team and finalise your list after this.

A third problem can involve finding the mentors. Often putting up posters, in hard or electronic form, brings little response. Seeking mentors in the term before you want the scheme to start can also bring little success. The best approach can be to visit second year seminars very early in the academic year. You could take along a mentor and/or a mentee from the previous year. Ensure you choose a seminar where your colleague will support you to give you and the scheme an enthusiastic introduction. If you intend to pay your mentors, the incentive of an hourly payment can gain students` attention, so that you can then state the benefits of having mentoring skills on a CV, together with the feelings of reward and satisfaction that being a mentor can bring. Finally, be aware of what the author calls ``safety net `` mentees. These are students who are skilled users of the education system, who convince their personal academic tutors and /or other staff on your course team that they have a strong need for support. Eventually you will discover that they are also clients of Student Services, Learning Development and various other helping agencies of your university. You will also discover that they rarely attend their appointments but have tried to take advantage of anything on offer that could help them should it become necessary. If you can only offer support to a few of your year one students, you need to ensure that your resources are not taken up by such a person to the detriment of others in the group who may be more deserving. These `safety net`

mentees rarely, if ever, make use of their mentor after the first meeting and you need to be aware of the possibility of such cases so that the mentor can start to support someone else. All of these decisions need to be taken within the context of your own institution and course.

Other Issues for consideration

There are many other issues to be considered when setting up a student to student mentoring scheme. These include whether to pay your mentors and whether to embed a scheme into the curriculum. You need to have strategies in place to deal with events such as a pairing of mentor and mentee does not get on, a mentee does not make use of their mentor, and situations where the students suggested by your team as being in need of a mentor outnumber your mentors .All of these elements need to be tailored to your institution and course

Conclusion

Student to student mentoring schemes can be a wonderful way to integrate your new students into your course, with lasting effects for retention and achievement. You can also learn about your course by listening to what your mentors are hearing about the first year experience.

> "Understanding what students are thinking and how they are feeling is the first step to getting retention results."(Noel and Levitz, 1999).

Student mentoring schemes can form part of Habeshaw`s (1999) supportive educational environment, which can encourage learning and development. With enthusiasm and passion and good management, a student to student mentoring scheme can provide a wonderful opportunity for your Continuing Education students.

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5. "A little less conversation, a little more action please" Using multimedia to engage the first year student during induction and post induction: lessons learned from a twin institution collaboration

Gaynor Cavanagh: University of Teesside and Caroline Dobson, Debbie Holley: London Metropolitan University

Summary
With very different first year cohorts, this paper will critically evaluate the use of a set of multimedia activities developed in one institution and reused in a different context in another.

London Metropolitan University:
With buildings across London the Quickstart project (www.learning.londonmet.ac.uk/bssmQuickstart/) was designed using interactive multimedia combined with classroom learning, to meet the learning needs of 1000 students across three dispersed sites. Two-thirds of the students are mature learners, most with English as a second language. This high proportion of mature learners changes the learning dynamic, as students often attend for lectures only. The informal learning that takes place on a campus where students are present more of their time is missing. This project focussed on the crucial first four weeks, where research tells us students make the "stay or go" decision. An interactive web based resource was created, aimed at non-traditional students, engaging them with positive attributes of academic life from their very first University experience. The concept was to lessen the impact of the start of year uncertainties for new undergraduate students, many of who found the University environment alienating, impersonal and unsupportive.

University of Teesside:
The majority of students within the School of Computing at Teesside University fall within the 18-21 year-old cohort. On-campus accommodation and local housing provision is normally provided for all first year students. Emphasis is placed on attending classes for formal learning and as a consequence creates opportunities for informal learning. The induction week aims to provide an introduction to the University and the support services available. However, evaluations showed that there were still too many passive inactive sessions where students were bombarded with information. Information overload was inevitable.

This paper discusses the similarities of introducing first year students to University life, and the differences in approach taken by two Higher Education Institutions. It concludes with some reflections on the impact of the project upon the diverse student cohorts.

Keywords
Widening Participation / Multimedia / Student Induction

Introduction
A key factor causing student withdrawal is social isolation. The issue has been highlighted in American universities by Tinto (1993) and Braxton (1997). Indeed, there is growing evidence in more recent literature that this is also an issue in the UK (Bowl, 2003), (McGivney, 2003). MacKie (2001) identifies social integration as one of four forces that come together to encourage movement towards the end goal of integration into university life whilst Tillman (2002) identifies 'social isolation' as one of the six factors impacting on retention in a general way. According to Tinto, (1997) we can no longer focus on changing the student to enhance their chances of success, but need to consider changing institutions, teaching and Higher Education (HE) cultures to better meet the needs of students entering HE. Consequently, many universities are now placing great emphasis on providing essential support for students to help them adapt and adjust to the HE environment.

Background
Governmental interventions in educational policy and ICT are not new, and often linked to current thinking on the economic circumstances of the nation. Conole, White & Beetham (2006) suggest the most important policy report impacting on Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) was the Dearing Report (NCIHE 1997). This report sets the main macro-policy context within which this study is situated, as it was the culmination of a systematic review into HE that made a series of recommendations, which have influenced the focus and direction of many ICT projects. A key strategic outcome of the Dearing Report is that the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) now requires all HE institutions to have a clear and demonstrable learning and teaching strategy as a condition of funding, along with institutional information strategies. McNaught and Kennedy (2000) suggest that these strategies together are an attempt to embed ICT into the institution, set into a series of nation wide policy

initiatives.

Smith (2002) categorises technologies and policy development into four distinct phases. The first 1965-1979 characterised by centralised mainframe systems, with time-shred resources and expert operators. The second time frame of 1980-1989 marks a shift toward stand-alone computers, the emergence of distributed resources and experimentation by early adopters, with the use of email growing towards the end of the decade. The third phase, or time period is defined as 1990-2000, and sees the emergence of the Internet as a key driver of networking technologies and collaboration. This phase is significant in terms of development, as these technologies lowered the technical entry barrier for academic staff. Phase four is categorised by politicisation and systemisation, and learner-centrism. With technological development came awareness from academic staff that, with the flexibility and accessibility offered by new technology, more creative ways could be used to reach students through this new medium. It has been suggested that these policy developments mark a fundamental shift away from the individual innovator towards a "systematic and politically driven model of online education," Smith (2002:104).

The UK approach to 'encouraging' alternatives to traditional classroom teaching can best be located within an international context. The increasing political intervention into HE, justified from Governmental perspectives as meeting the needs of a "knowledge economy" (Hodge 2002) enabling the UK to compete within the international trading environment. Writers such as White & Davis (2002) set the context of technology as breaking down international barriers to education. Computer–mediated learning environments make possible whole new ways of learning. They create global learning communities of student and professor practitioners. They "connect people across cultures, learning styles, and industries, and they enable global conversations about issues and ideas that matter. They have extraordinary power to stitch together practical experience, academic theory, personal reflection and deep emotion." (White & Davis 2002:233).

The multimedia projects described in this paper are based on the need to engage students entering university through widening participation polices in a way that is more meaningful to them. The HEFCE publication M8/97 (June 1997) defined non- traditional students as having at least one of the following characteristics:

- From an ethnic minority group;
- Had a long-term disability;
- Possessed non-standard qualifications on entry to higher education;
- Were aged over 25 years on entry to University;
- Were from lower socio-economic groups of origin.

London Metropolitan University: Using Multimedia to engage our new students

London Metropolitan University express commitment to widening participation. This agenda can lead to challenges for those teaching a diverse student body. Around two-thirds of the students are mature learners, often with English as a second language. Having a high proportion of mature learners changes the typical learning dynamic, as the students very often attend for lectures only. The informal learning that takes place on a more residential campus, where students are present for more of their time, is missing at our University. Research by Pheiffer et al (2003) showed that by week eleven of their semester, only 19% of year one students had joined a student society, and only 44% had attended a social event at the university. The students experience financial hardship, and many are trying to combine full time study with nearly full time work, with an average of 15 working hours per week. This project focussed on the crucial first four weeks, where research tells us students make the "stay or go" decision. An interactive web based resource was created, aimed at non-traditional students, engaging them with positive attributes of academic life from their very first university experience. The concept was to lessen the impact of the start of year uncertainties for new undergraduate students, many of who found the university environment alienating, impersonal and unsupportive.

With buildings across London the Quickstart project (www.learning.londonmet.ac.uk/bssmQuickstart/) was designed using interactive multimedia combined with classroom learning, to meet the learning needs of 1000 students across three dispersed sites. A requirement of the first year modular scheme is for each student to study a core module designed to introduce the context of HE. Previous research (Pheiffer et al 2003, Holley et al 2004,) on the year one student experience indicated that many of the students shared the characteristics of being unreflective, lacking motivation, being surface learners and unengaged with the learning process.

It was felt the course needed a more interesting and innovative approach. The course redesign looked to engage both staff and students in a more meaningful learning dialogue. In traditional campus based universities it is recognised that one factor for student success is that students are physically present, and that therefore one way of encouraging student involvement is to attract them to spend more time on campus. Our students could not be expected to be on campus physically due to their multitude of commitments and the tight room resourcing of an inner city university, but it may be possible for them to engage with university life virtually. Collis & Moonen (2001:33) explore the meaning of the term virtual as applied to university life, and within this paper, virtual applies in terms of mobility, where a

student can stay at home (or another location of choice) to access materials.

Laurillard (2002 p181) suggests that the design of learning materials for any medium should begin with the definition of objectives and analysis of student learning needs. The Quickstart project was developed by a team comprising the author, who had a number of years experience with teaching year one students and an interest in using Learning Technologies to engage students, the internal Teaching and Learning Technology Centre (TLTC) staff and partnership externally from the Academy of Enterprise. Learning objectives included the development of teamwork, time management, research, initiative, written and oral communication skills. Each of the online multimedia tasks was designed to lead the student triads through the processes of familiarisation with the expectations of becoming an academic learner.

The Quickstart project

The key aims agreed by the development team were:
a) To develop a resource that would engage students from their first lecture/seminar whether they first attended in week 1,2, 3, or 4.
b) To develop resources that would enable them to work independently on something interesting and directly related to assessment.
c) To encourage new students to settle in quickly and start to orientate to their new environment, a key project aim was to facilitate small friendship groups from their first week.

The learning outcomes agreed by the project team included teamwork, project management, research, writing skills and presentation skills.   The next step involved incorporating these tasks into an interesting and engaging web site. The team decided that the ideal activity would be a field trip to a museum or art gallery in London. The chosen institute needed to have a free admission policy and be accessible by public transport as the university's buildings are located over a wide geographical area. The gallery also needed to have good online resources so that if a student joined the course after week 1 it would be possible to take part in the project remotely. The Tate Modern encapsulated a young, exciting vibe, oozing creativity and imagination, making it the ideal choice for the project.

The small student groups were given the role of merchandising directors at the Tate Modern art gallery and needed to come up with a new and exciting merchandise product based on an artwork at the Tate Modern. The web site navigation look and feel is a room layout, board game. The five rooms represent the five areas of the project. The rooms are colour coded to reinforce to the user that they are in different areas of the site. Each room would become a micro site i.e. a

standalone web site within a web site accessed from the map. The navigation requested the user to return to the map after completing each section. This linear style of navigation was chosen to ensure that the student was able to see very clearly all of the tasks set out in each of the rooms with a checklist included at the end of each section. If the student is accessing the web site on a week-by-week basis then the rooms correspond with teaching in class.

The Quickstart project was designed and developed using the suite of Macromedia MX products including Dreamweaver, Fireworks and Flash. The Quickstart web site is an open access web based resource hosted on a university server enabling a flexible learning approach. The student needs access to an Internet-enabled computer allowing full use of the web site at any time. Whilst designing the development phase of a web-based resource there are some fundamental limitations and restrictions, such as the compromise between low file size and good quality for graphics and page sizes. Fast download times were a crucial specification for the user accessing the site.

Figure 1 Navigation Plan

Evaluation of Quickstart
Quantitative

The web statistics were collated using the server log file in conjunction with the freeware software package Analog version 5.32. Successful page requests are those where the document is returned i.e. the page is displayed to the user correctly. Redirected requests are those indicating that the user was directed to a different file instead. The most common cause of these requests is that the user has incorrectly typed in the URL (uniform resource locator or web address) and the server then redirects them to another page.

In the initial phase of the 'Quickstart' project, there were 40,358 successful requests for pages in the first 4 weeks, which were crucial for our project, as this is when many students make their 'stay or go' decision.   A daily

average of 1,449 successful requests for pages was documented in the server log stats. This information was received by the project team with incredulity, as it far surpassed expectations of student activity online. The site was visited nearly every hour, day and night, for the whole period being reviewed – the Sunday of the second week being significant as only one hour slot showed no activity – 4am-5am. The overall pattern reflects the teaching, during week one, being very difficult due to administrative problems and many students not yet attending class. By week three, most seminar groups had been formed, and the key lectures started to emphasise site usage.

Qualitative Evaluation
Evaluation of this project was factored in with the design of the website. Upon completion, students were prompted to complete an online evaluation form. However, this approach has its limitations, as arguably those less engaged with the learning process, taking a surface learning approach identified by Pheiffer et al (op. cit), would be the least likely to take part in evaluation. Therefore, quantitative data examining the web site statistics in the first crucial four weeks of the teaching semester has been used in conjunction with the classroom view elicited from the field notes of a researcher sitting in one of the small seminar classes and interacting freely with the students. The researcher was a recent young graduate, and able to talk freely to students without many of the power constraints that would be raised if the lecturer undertook this work (Brookfield & Preskill 1999). Although limited to one seminar group, this does give valuable insight into the actual student experience in the classroom.

The researcher reports evidence of engagement of students into the learning process by the high standard of the presentation exercise, the enthusiasm of the students towards the project and the amount of work that they put into the tasks. Interviews with the students revealed that many teams became highly engaged with the multimedia-learning project and went beyond the minimum requirements. Some teams visited the Tate Modern twice or more during the project and others spent over 8 hours a week working on the Quickstart project tasks. Extract from notes "There are indications that the Quickstart project has facilitated the forming of student friendships in the first year and therefore contributing to student retention. A high level of interaction between students and strong informal social groups was noticed during tutorials as the project has given them the opportunity to work together and get to know each other."

Most students liked the ease of access, navigation and interactivity of the site. The link into facilitation of group work was reported as a good way to get to know other

students, and the self-learning facility 'any time any where' was valued.

> 'this is a new project for me. Making a new product and planning how to make it work – it is really exciting! ..and I got to make friends too!!'

> 'Visiting the museum..i had never been to a museum before and it was a good place to use my educational skills'

> 'it was a very unique module, I enjoyed the ideas and lay out of the tasks, they were all different, colourful. It was better than being given tasks in seminars in the traditional way, I could work at my own pace.'

> 'learning can be interesting'

Re-use of Quickstart: Different Context; Different University; Different Students
The University of Teesside (UoT) provides a wide range of support systems, throughout the university, and within each of the six schools. This support ranges from the provision of professional counsellors, to peer-mentoring schemes and personal tutors. With over 500 first year students within the School of Computing alone, it is essential that the available support be communicated to students immediately, in a format they will retain. Previous primary research, via questionnaires, clearly showed that much of the information provided during induction was quickly forgotten and information overload was a frequent criticism of the induction week. The initial application, developed by London Metropolitan University, provided a framework that could be developed and adapted for almost any learning activity. By supplanting original content into this framework a unique application was developed that provided an innovative and interactive approach to induction.

The underlying aims of the new application were to:
a) Provide information about the School of Computing and its procedures in an interactive and engaging way.
b) Create team based activities that encourage students to interact and communicate with each other.
d) Enable students to obtain information within their own time frame.

The Application
The content within the application specifically focused upon providing students with essential information concerning support systems, procedures and regulations within the school, and UoT as a whole, in a highly interactive and engaging way. This crucial information was originally conveyed via lectures; however, this passive experience often resulted in information overload and proved very unpopular with the students. With the

new online system, students were able to access information in their own time, absorb as much content as they wished, and refer back to the information when necessary. The application also included information regarding the surrounding area, specific study skills, and other essential information, particularly for students who may be living away from home for the first time, such as basic recipes and how to budget, (see screenshots).
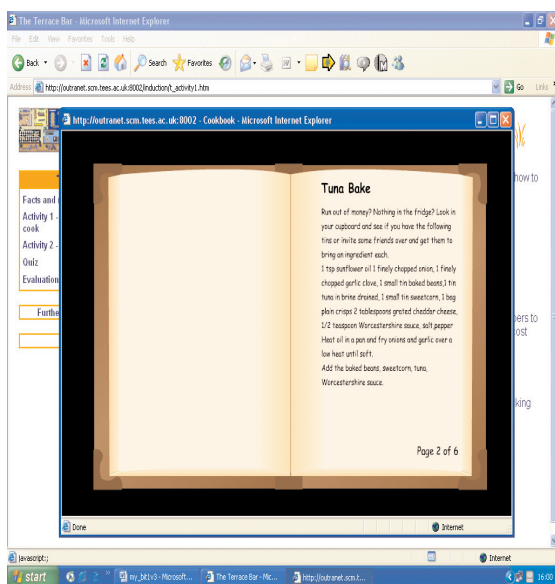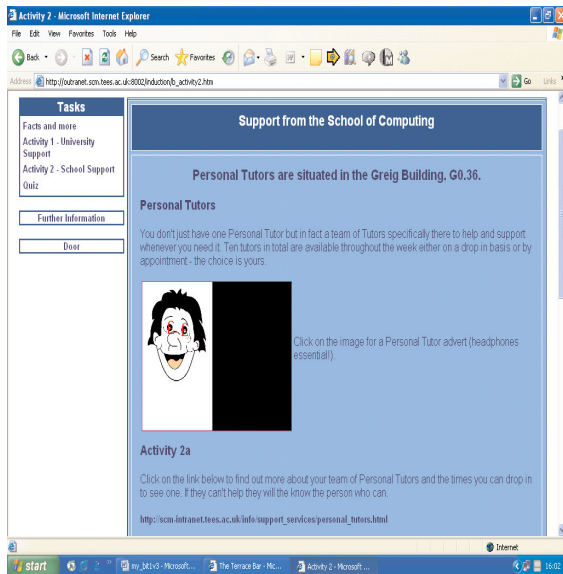

Figure 2 & 3 Screenshots of the application

Process
The application was placed on the school's intranet and involved students accessing information both on the intranet and on Blackboard. This enabled the students to move seamlessly between the school's two communication systems encouraging awareness and interaction with both. Team based activities and quizzes formed an integral part of the application. Quizzes were integrated into each section of the application with keywords provided on completion. Successful

completion of an anagram from the retrieved keywords enabled the students to be entered into a prize draw. The students also had to complete the integrated evaluation form before they could submit their answer.

Added Value multimedia application was designed to ensure the students interacted and communicated with each other during the important transitional period between school, or further education, and university. The students were immediately put into teams during their initial lab session. They were required to enter the prize draw as a team and submit a team name. The team activities incorporated into the application included visiting local places of interest, inviting team mates for a budget meal, obtaining reference information from the university library as well as obtaining information about the university and the school in an electronic 'treasure-hunt'.

Throughout the application a variety of activities were designed to encourage the students to post comments and opinions onto various discussion forums. The most popular forum was 'Got a cookin' tip' which, in the first week, had over 200 postings. Students were communicating with each other via extremely informal means, nevertheless, the postings continued until well after induction had finished. The team-based activities promoted friendly competition and more importantly encouraged interaction and communication. As a consequence, the students were subtly building their own informal support structure both with their team mates and via their on-line postings to the discussion forums.

The emergence of such small peer networks is as important, if not more so, than all the formal support any university can offer.

Developments
One of the main developments from the original application was the incorporation of quizzes. This involved extensive use of Flash MX 2004. A quiz was designed for each of the six sections of the application and upon successful completion a keyword was provided which was later required to access the prize draw. The use of quizzes to test whether the students had absorbed essential information was extremely successful.

Information overload was avoided and the student could return to relevant information at any point to locate the appropriate answer. This feature will be extended much further in the next phase of this application's development. An important improvement has been the development of a template that will enable an administrator to add or remove information as necessary. Such editing can be carried out via external text files and therefore only minimal knowledge of HTML or Flash

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coding will be necessary. A completely new interface has been developed which is more interactive and engaging than the original. In addition, music, with controls and options, has been incorporated. The use of MP3 files will ensure a small file size.

This extensive re design will hopefully result in a template that can be used not only by other schools within UoT, but may also prove a useful resource for other universities.

Evaluation at Teesside
An electronic evaluation of both induction week generally and this activity specifically was integrated into the application. When the evaluations were submitted, JavaScript was used to check that all the questions within the evaluation had a response. The responses were then automatically input to a MySQL database together with a value indicating whether the key word was correct or not. The data was exported in .csv format, which was imported into Excel. This provided a clear and accurate overview of all responses with corresponding statistics. An unforeseen consequence of the questionnaire's integration into the application was that some students completed the evaluation before they had completed all scheduled activities. In future, the evaluation and prize draw will be time-locked and the students will only be able to complete this section at the end of the induction period.

Feedback from the evaluation was very encouraging with many positive comments regarding the value of working in a team and forming friendships at the outset. Nearly 80% of respondents found the application useful to very useful. Moreover 86% of respondents agreed that the activity encouraged them to interact with their colleagues. When asked which aspect of the on-line induction activity they enjoyed the most, "teamwork", "making friends", "team-building" and "interacting with new people" were the most frequent responses.

> "The enjoyment in working in a team to achieve and find answers to the quiz questions….",

> "It got us to communicate with each other"

> "its perfect, easy to understand and not overly complicated…."

> "Plugs information directly into my head"

As the application was designed for students within the School of Computing, who are generally extremely familiar with computers, games, animation and the Internet, it was reassuring that the overall application was acceptable to such a target audience.

Conclusions:
Technological
As the Teesside project developed, the amount of content integrated within it increased substantially. Rather than presenting too much information at the outset and again possibly risking information overload, some content was removed from the original application and will be time-locked for future usage within specific modules. This relates specifically to the educational content on writing and presentation skills, explicit content for a particular module. Module leaders may choose to use this application as a vehicle to teach this content at some future point. At London Metropolitan, these concerns did not apply as the multimedia developer worked with the lecturing team throughout the project, and thus resources developed were clearly within the pedagogic framework of the module.

The Teesside project used Macromedia Flash MX extensively to incorporate dynamic quiz screens into the primary model of the site. This was upgraded to MX 2004 for the revised version to take advantage of certain features available. To enable quick and easy maintenance of various Flash elements such as the quiz screens, XML and external text files were used to load in text content. This allows content, such as quiz questions, to be rapidly developed and updated and allows for easy customisation without the need for high-level programming skills.

The original Quickstart resource was intended for a target audience of Business School and Service Sector Management students. At the design and development stage the project team chose the student tasks to be orientated around generic study skills such as research methods, brainstorming and presentation techniques. This enabled the resource to be transferable and become subject independent. With a certain amount of web authoring this allowed the web site to become institute independent.

Institutional
This project set out to engage new undergraduate non-traditional students by integrating a rich series of multimedia learning objects within a teaching and learning strategy at London Metropolitan University and within an induction framework at the University of Teesside. For London Metropolitan, the small group presentations, undertaken mid-semester were reported by staff to be of significantly better quality than those of previous intakes. The web statistics show patterns of exceptional student activity and students are accessing material 24 hours a day. Moreover there is clear evidence of activity in the evening and at weekends, when teaching staff and IT rooms are not available on university premises. The field notes gathered during seminar activity give a glimpse of the student experience

where students are making friends, exploring a museum together and attending classes. Anxiety levels remain high for these students; the researcher and lecturer both noticed that "reassurance" is a key requirement from students, albeit not clearly articulated.

At Teesside, the initial Quickstart project was adapted to essentially communicate information regarding The School of Computing and UoT's support systems via the use of multimedia. Students were able to access this information in their own time frame. The emergence of small support networks, whether as a result of the team activities or via interaction with the various discussion forums, not only reflected the effectiveness of the project, but also, more importantly, clearly demonstrated the value students place on such networks.

It is not possible to ascertain whether projects such as these actually help retain an individual student, however, it is possible to evaluate the overall student experience during their initial time at the two institutions. Thus, it is clear from the evaluation data, that both projects did much more than simply achieving its aims.

And for the first year student experience:
Despite concerns over the Governmental policies to drive through systematic models of online education, this joint project has shown that changing attitudes to C&IT may well have marked the shift away from the individual innovator suggested by Smith (op.cit); however, large multimedia developments of this scale are beyond the capabilities and resources of the individual. Cross-institutional sharing of best practice in terms of both pedagogy and technology can create a much richer learning experience for the student. With the current massification of HE, it takes dedicated and creative teams of staff drawn from different disciplines and with different skill sets, to find new and innovative ways of engaging our students. The way in which this type of multimedia project develops is significantly different from the traditional model where the academic is responsible for curriculum development. Professional multimedia developers find themselves in the classroom evaluating their developments with students; lecturers find themselves grappling with a whole new set of concepts; new students find themselves drawn through interactive sequences of activities offered through a new and exciting medium.

Thus, the traditional entry point to HE, be it at induction or in a core initial module, where conversational 'ice breaking' activities were offered, are now transformed into action orientated activities that help to create small peer networks. The students from both our institutions valued this opportunity to work with others, to make friends, to work in a more interactive and engaging way with multimedia resources scaffolding their learning. It

remains to be discovered whether these initiatives can contribute as part of an institution's retention strategy, and tracking of the two student cohorts at the institutions will provide much clearer insights into this evolving area of policy development at both national and local level.

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6. Social Anxiety Student Learning and Well-Being

Graham Russell, Alex Brown: University of Plymouth

Summary
This paper explores the potential impact of social anxiety on student learning and well-being by drawing on research literature and a recent prevalence survey of 1000 University of Plymouth students carried out by Russell and Shaw (2006). In addition, potential means of supporting students with social anxiety are outlined and discussed.

Keywords
Social interaction / behaviour / demographic values / graded exposure

The nature of social anxiety
Social anxiety is a disabling condition that is characterised by fear and avoidance of social situations that necessitate social interaction and performance activities. Recent epidemiological studies show that social anxiety is highly prevalent and ranks as the third most common mental health problem after major depression and alcohol abuse (Furmark 2002). Yet, despite its prevalence social anxiety frequently goes undetected, in part because sufferers are embarrassed by their anxiety and avoid sharing their fears with others lest they are judged to be inadequate (Bruce and Saeed 1999).

The typical onset is during adolescence, where social anxiety is often triggered by some life stressor or major transitional event (Rapee and Spence 2004). There is, however, evidence that social anxiety may exist in a 'latent' form before it is expressed as an anxiety disorder in adolescence (Hudson and Rapee 2000). Latent social anxiety may manifest in primary school as 'shyness' and social inhibition, which is typically regarded as normal by parents and teachers. Indeed, social anxiety is not usually recognised unless it is associated with truancy and school phobia (Kashdan and Herbert 2001).

The root causes of social anxiety are generally believed to lie in an inherited temperament pattern that interacts with familial transmission of behaviour and beliefs. From a genetic perspective there is no suggestion that people inherit social anxiety rather they acquire an innate wariness of new environments and strangers that results in behavioural inhibition (Hudson and Rapee 2000). This temperament or disposition combines with a 'reactive' autonomic nervous system, which causes internal (physiological) alarm bells to ring more frequently and easily than is the norm and has the effect of making some children inherently wary and anxious of novel, social situations (Lewis 2005). Viewed from an evolutionary perspective, this could be viewed as adaptive, given that it benefits social groups to have individuals that are genetically disposed to take risks and individuals that are naturally cautious and inhibited. Of course, to succeed in contemporary western societies individuals are required to forgo caution and to behave in

a way that is confident and outgoing (a point we will return to later in considering student support). The main route for transmission of social anxiety, however, is via parental modelling of behaviour and adverse parenting styles (Hudson and Rapee 1992). The child with a socially anxious parent, for example, is likely to witness that their parent(s) regularly behaves with unease and fear in social situations and the anxiety is vicariously transmitted to the child. Furthermore, if the parent frequently avoids social events the child is denied exposure to common social situations and is, hence, unable to develop and rehearse appropriate social skills (Rapee and Spence 2004). Adverse parenting styles (e.g. the use of shame tactics to shape behaviour or the setting or unrealistically high goals) may combine with temperament to deliver a potent cocktail where anxiety is underpinned by negative self-other beliefs and low self-esteem (Buss 1980). Hence, the seeds of social anxiety are set in childhood, but are most likely to be expressed during the turbulent years of adolescence when major life transitions occur (Kashdan and Herbert 2001); one of which may feasibly comprise the move from secondary to higher education, which for many students involves moving from a relatively safe and familiar environment to one which is characterised by uncertainty and unknown challenges.

At this point we should note that social anxiety spans a continuum of distress and dysfunction. At the one end social anxiety may be relatively mild and situationally-bound with relatively little dysfunction. This is sometimes referred to as non-generalised social anxiety, such as may occur, for example, if someone is asked to give a presentation to a public audience or to give a speech as best-man at a wedding. Such social anxiety is regarded as broadly normal and is generally non-dysfunctional. At the other end of the spectrum, however, social anxiety is characterised by severe distress and frequent avoidance of social situations that involve social interaction or require some act of public performance on the sufferer's behalf. This form of social anxiety is referred to as generalised social anxiety and it is associated with intense fear and dysfunction, poor attainment in school, problems forming relationships, low socio-economic status (Stein et al 1999; Schneier et al 1994; Turner et al

1986) and high co-morbidity for depression and alcohol abuse (Merikangas and Angst 1995).

Social Anxiety as a potential barrier to participation and achievement in higher education

People with social anxiety are overly fearful of others' negative criticism and frequently avoid situations that involve participating in groups, working whilst being observed, talking to people in authority, meeting or talking to strangers and maintaining eye contact, being the centre of attention, talking to groups or giving presentations and eating or drinking in public (Liebowitz 2003; Safren et al 1999; American Psychiatric Association 1994). In addition, it is well known that high levels of anxiety disrupt memory and concentration (Wells and Mathews 1994) and social anxiety has the effect of focussing attention on internal feedback (such as 'butterflies' in the stomach and feelings dizzy), which diverts attention away from task activities (Veale 2003). Hence, students that experience high levels of social anxiety during a presentation or when asked a question in a seminar are likely to struggle to present content fluidly and with confidence. This would have a direct effect on student achievement where a presentation or participation in group work was formally assessed. However, the anxious student's behaviour might also result in the tutor forming a negative impression, which could have a subsequent impact on assessment of other work via the so-called halo effect (i.e. Dennis et al 1996; Atkinson et al 1993). Just as alarming, however, is the prospect that non-attendance due to anxiety may be misattributed to potential factors, such social loafing, lack of motivation or even a lack of intelligence.

Prevalence of social anxiety

Recent epidemiological studies show that social anxiety is common in adults and young people with rates in western populations varying between 10 and 16% (Furmark 2002; Merikangas et al 2002). There has been little research in university populations that we are aware of. However, in a recent study of 1000 University of Plymouth students, across seven faculties (Russell and Shaw 2006), approximately 10% of students were found to have marked to severe social anxiety scores on the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (Liebowitz 2003;1987), whilst 12% of students were found to have generalised social anxiety, using clinical cut-off scores developed by Menin et al (2002).

The analyses also looked at the relationship between social anxiety and demographic variables, including age, and whereas studies typically portray first year students as being at greatest risk of developing mental health problems (e.g. Adalf et al 2001; Royal College of Psychiatrists 2003; Voitkane 2004), social anxiety was found to be least prevalent in younger students aged 20 or less. This finding was contrary to expectations, as it was reasoned that older students would experience less social anxiety because their coping skills would have been developed over time so as to lessen anxiety in response to challenging situations. What the data actually showed was a small, but statistically significant, rise in reported social anxiety across age, supporting the premise that social anxiety is a chronic, unremitting condition. A number of other statistically significant findings were obtained: Social anxiety was found to be more prevalent in women and in students of black and Chinese origin and students from the Faculties of Technology and Arts registered the highest scores.

Discussion and support recommendations

The data from the aforementioned study suggests that social anxiety is prevalent in UK universities with significant number of students reporting the generalised form, which is very likely to be detrimental to general well-being and learning. Students with generalised social anxiety are highly likely to be fearful of activities such as presentations and group learning. They will frequently avoid situations, which expose them to potential ridicule and it is probable that some will drop-out of university at an early stage, because they are unable to cope with their anxiety.

We suggest that social anxiety support needs to be targeted at students of all ages. However, special attention needs to be given to students new to higher education as many will develop social anxiety in response to adjustment stress during the first year of study. This is most likely to occur in students aged 20 and under, as late onset social anxiety is relatively rare and is more typically linked to a pre-existing mental health problem (Kashdan and Herbert 2001).

Raising staff awareness

Given that social anxiety is a chronic condition, which is associated with failure to achieve ones' full potential in respect of education, career development and personal relationships, there is a strong onus on universities to support students, who have or are likely to develop social anxiety, in order to prevent or minimise distress and to create optimal conditions for personal growth and learning. Perhaps the most obvious strategy for supporting students is to raise staff awareness of social anxiety and to develop guidelines for pastoral support and best practice when organising learning events that are likely to threaten socially anxious students, such as presentations, seminars and group learning. We suggest these guidelines should identify best practices and should embrace factors that are known to reduce anxiety, such as building peer-support within student groups, using graded exposure to challenging task activities and setting clear goals and expectations so that 'threatening unknowns' are removed from situations. We also suggest that given the general lack of awareness of

social anxiety information is included in new lecturers' induction programmes with emphasis placed on recognising social anxiety so that it is not inadvertently conflated with 'social loafing' or lack of intelligence. It may also be prudent to foster awareness of social anxiety in other front-line university staff, such as those working in the library, information technology, disability services and health and welfare personnel.

Developing student skills

Gradual changes in teaching and learning methods have resulted in a strong emphasis on social interaction and presentation skills in higher education programmes. In addition, effective learning is predicated upon the ability and motivation to effectively seek and share information and advice from staff and peers. We, therefore, suggest that socially anxious students should be supported in developing confidence in these key areas. For example, support programmes and information could be developed to help students manage speech anxiety in the classroom by aiding competence in accurately identifying task requirements, providing opportunities for graded rehearsal and the development of skills for managing personal anxiety that might otherwise interfere with recall and concentration. Whilst this type of support might be offered within small groups for students with low social anxiety, it would need to be packaged as web-based information or one-to-one tutorial support for students high in social anxiety as they are very likely to avoid group support activities.

Support for student well-being

Give that social anxiety is associated with high levels of distress, difficulty forming relationships and co-morbidity for depression and alcohol-abuse it is incumbent on universities to provide support for students with social anxiety. The literature suggests that students with mental health problems turn to peers first and then on a rapidly diminishing scale; personal tutors and counselling services (University of Leicester 2004; Mental Health Foundation 2001). Hence, universities should consider the use of peer support networks and information technologies such as 'texting' to provide information and support. In addition, we advocate sign-posting to existing voluntary sector resources such as the National Phobics Society via the student intranet and Students' Union web-site.

Although we suggest that many students with social anxiety may be given practical support to cope with challenging learning activities, there is likely to be a small proportion of socially anxious students that are too severely distressed to cope with assessed presentations and the like in group settings. These students may require exemption from such task activities. However, we also draw attention to exposure and rehearsal as key elements of, what are known to be effective, CBT

approaches for social anxiety (Veale 2003; Clark 2001). Hence, an ideal approach for students presenting with severe social anxiety would consist of personal and pedagogic support for presentations and small group work rather than outright abstention, which may inadvertently reinforce negative self-beliefs.

On a more general level, we recommend that support systems and information are developed in partnership with socially anxious students, drawing on the success of 'expert-patient' approaches used in the NHS (2005). Students with social anxiety have a potentially valuable role to play in helping to identify and develop appropriate support information and structures for help with academic work and optimising well-being. However, consideration should be given to the methods employed as some socially anxious students may be reluctant to take part in group activities with academic staff. Hence, on-line surveys, etc, may be required to gather and develop intelligence and feedback on potential modes of support.

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7. The effectiveness of embedded academic support in addressing retention

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Summary
The authors will provide a discussion of the literature relating to retention and the place of academic student support models within teaching and learning in higher education. A case study example from the University of Technology in Sydney, Australia in which an embedded approach to academic skills has been used successfully with a first year student group will be discussed. Current examples from Napier University will be given and suggestions for further research to evaluate the effectiveness of the embedded model of academic support. The authors will conclude by suggesting that this model will benefit all students and assist retention strategies. Support from senior management in the institutions and the academic community is needed if new initiatives are to be implemented to support changes to academic support.

Keywords
retention / academic / support / embedded / skills / students

Introduction
Universities have the challenge of ensuring that the first year experience for all students, however diverse enables them to develop the appropriate academic skills to become successful students. Great emphasis is placed on the wider access agenda and the non-traditional students however the diversity of the student population means that retention is also an issue. There are students from different educational and cultural backgrounds and experiences who also have a variety of expectations as they approach a new stage in their educational development. High drop-out rates in universities have meant that issues surrounding retention and progression have forced institutions to implement retention projects and initiatives to investigate the causes and factors involved. However the successful implementation of the findings and recommendations seems to be more difficult to achieve.

Napier and University of Technology Sydney (UTS)
The student profile at Napier includes a high proportion of mature direct entrants from further education colleges (FE). According to the statistics for the academic session 2003/2004, 35% of all level 3 students were direct entrants with 16% being from overseas and 19% from colleges of further education (Johnston, Knox and MacLeod 2005). Furthermore, 66% of all Napier's new entrants were from families where neither parent went to university. Finally, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2005) 95.9% of Napier's students are from state schools. In 2003/04, 866 new students were admitted from FE colleges together with 671continuing students already studying at Napier (Thomson, E. 2004)

In the light of the research on retention and non-traditional entrants the figures have significance for Napier's academic support for students. The student body easily matches Professor Alex Radlof's description of the 21st century student body, which is described as

'Mature, diverse, vocational, multiply committed, a commuter and cost and prestige sensitive'. (ATLAANZ 2005 Keynote address)

Retention
The diverse backgrounds of students who attend university from school or as mature students from college, presents a challenge to institutions, which aim to support and retain the students. Retention has become a major issue for higher education in the U.K. This is especially the case since David Blunkett asked universities to 'do something about the drop out rate' in 2000. (Christie, Munro & Fisher 2004:618). A poor retention rate has come to be seen as economic and social wastage and the level of retention of an institution may be used as a measure of effectiveness. (Yorke, 2004) This is echoed by a discussion of the inclusion of retention/graduation statistics as an overall measure of 'institutional quality' Barefoot (2004 p9). Indeed, Barefoot (2004 p10) shows how, for tuition dependent institutions, the loss of students can be catastrophic. This is also the case for British higher education in terms of government funding.

Noticeable in the literature is the continuing and widespread use of negative language labels in regards to retention (Yorke 2003 & 2004, Quinn et al 2005, Barefoot 2004, Christie, Munro & Fisher 2004, Johnston et al 2005). The words drop out, wastage, failure and non-achievement have a negative tone to them.

Quinn, Thomas, Slack, Casey, Thexton and Noble (2005:13) argue that retention is seen as a 'moral imperative'. To drop out is an indication of a lack of moral fibre. Furthermore, the authors see this as a narrow conception of lifelong learning, where there is a definite linear progression and completion in 'a fixed and predetermined time.' (p13) This can be seen as part of the political debate and management of outcomes

according to Peelo. (2002:17) Yorke (2004) argues that retention has become part of a 'supply-side' concept reflecting the interests of different parties.

In Australia, although literature addressing retention is widespread, particularly concerning the first year transition when attrition rates are highest, (Krause, 2001: Lawrence, 2003: Lawrence 2005: McInnes, 2001 and others) it seems to be of concern only to individual faculty members/faculties, not at an institutional level across the tertiary sector. Certainly the government, while threatening to withhold grant income unless universities comply with its demands in terms of courses, research and teaching requires no accountability for retention rates.

For Napier retention has been an issue taken very seriously. The Student Retention Project was established in 1994 within the Quality Enhancement Services and through the project a broad range of initiatives, materials, research and reports have been produced. A Director of Student Retention was appointed in 2005. In spite of this investment in time and money on retention initiatives, attrition rates are still high (21%) and it continues to be of concern for the institution (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2005). The implementation of strategies is frequently more difficult than the identification of factors that affect retention and the student experience.

Reason/factors for non-completion.
Yorke (2004), Quinn et al (2005) have identified a range of reasons for non-completion. These include gaps between further education and higher education, integrating and settling in to the university, experiencing academic difficulties and the perception that there is a lack of student support. There is evidence of institutions establishing a number of projects, schemes and courses to address retention. In the United States there is a 'retention industry' according to Barefoot (2004).

Change in thinking about retention
Quinn et al (2005) argue that universities have become part of the 'poverty industry' (p1). Universities are supposed to compensate for the loss of industry and reduce poverty. There is the assumption that higher education automatically ensures an escape from poverty. Yorke (2003 & 2004) points out the volume of research into drop out rates in distinct groups of students from non-traditional backgrounds. Indeed, Christie, Munro and Fisher (2004) highlight the expansion in higher education as one of the non-completion theories. This suggests that the traditional student who drops out is given less attention than the non-traditional student. The issue however may be that the pre-entry preparation and the support for all new students when they begin their academic studies should be given further consideration in conjunction with the teaching learning and

assessments methods used.

The figures presented from Napier University demonstrate that the institution has arguably widened participation. However, this does not mean that widening participation is not a 'risky business' (Johnston 2003, Trotter and Cove 2005, DfES 2003). Johnston, R (2003), Johnston et al. (2005) and Trotter and Cove (2005) highlight the gulf between college and university. College students entering university may struggle with the lack of familiarity with conventions and the discourse of the specific discipline. Furthermore, discipline staff may not always articulate clearly taught knowledge. For these students there may be a general lack of familiarity of learning at higher education level.

This is supported by the widespread agreement in the literature that expansion of participation in higher education has further complicated and problematised the transition to university (McInnes, 2001; Kirkpatrick and Mulligan, 2002; Krause, 2004). The consequence of increasing diversity of the current student population raises 'questions about student readiness, adjustment and the need to change approaches to teaching' (McInnes, 2001, p. 106). Integrating into the university is further complicated by the diversity of the students, each of whom has individual life experiences and perceptions that, 'when combined with contextual variables, impact on cognitive development and the quality of learning' (Krause, 2004). However, local students regardless of ethnic background can still find the transition from secondary school or technical colleges potentially problematic (Kirkpatrick, 2002) due to the gap between tasks required at university and students' preparedness for them. McInnes (2001, p.106) acknowledges despite the plethora of literature addressing the first year experience, 'students are at their most vulnerable in the first year in terms of their likelihood of academic failure'.

Despite the focus on the above students, Johnston's (2005) work has shown that students who withdraw are similar to those who stay. Research which only looks at backgrounds and experiences of 'drop-outs' gives no insight into why some students persist and others do not. For example, mature students at Napier are highly successful some years and not in others. Johnston argues that a long-term focus is needed and, indeed, the focus should be on issues rather than on distinct groups.

Similarly Lawrence (2005) reports while early research into retention focused on attrition and reasons for withdrawal, more recent research has acknowledged 'the complexity involved in the first year experience' in particular, related to academic transition, social and personal factors (p. 18). Lawrence comments on a second strand of retention research investigating 'whether student outcomes can be improved when

institutions adapt their cultures to meet their students' needs' (p. 18). The retention focus can then be seen to encompass the ways in which the processes of familiarity and engagement can be prioritised and made more explicit (p. 19). The main aim of academic support focus should be on at risk programmes and modules rather than referring to at risk students and considering them in the deficit model of support.

Addressing retention factors.
Johnston (2002:10) suggests that projects start with good intentions and much zeal but effort does not guarantee success. She also highlights some common mistakes of initiatives that work and those that do not work. Examples of these include assuming that good practice spreads organically, or the assumption that caring staff are enough to get the job done.

Yorke and Thomas (2003) reviewed six institutions with some degree of success in addressing retention. Examples of positive initiatives included recognition of the importance of the social dimension, giving formative assessment in the early phase of a programme and providing an emphasis on support leading up to, and during the critically important first year. The case study from UTS supports these findings.

Learning Support
The position of academic support within the university may be significant. The Institute for Access Studies at Staffordshire University (FACE 2003) conducted a study into the placement of support provided for students in the context of widening participation. It generalised by saying that student services have traditionally been seen as 'reactive' support or 'fire-fighters' (p.6).The study argues (p.7) that policy on participation and increasing consumer awareness has changed demand for support. Perceptions of the role of student services have also changed and is seen as supporting all students rather than being perceived as a last resort.

In 1997, following a UTS review, a major shift in educational strategies began together with the move to integrating academic language development into the curriculum of mainstream subjects in faculties. Thus, the profile of the academic support centre, the ELSSA Centre, changed to one of a developmental model, improving the quality of teaching and learning.

Skillen, Merten, Trivett and Percy (1999), highlight the three models of support that may exist in universities in one form or another as osmosis, generic or embedded models.

Models of academic support
The osmosis or 'sink or swim' model assumes that students who are admitted to the university should be able to cope placing the responsibility on the student. Students are expected to gain skills through osmosis by being exposed to them. Skillen et al. (1999), Chapple and Tolley (2000) and Johnston (2003) argue that new skills are necessary and should be taught and developed. Most students do not enter university equipped, and quite intellectually capable students may struggle. The generic or remedial model recognises that not all students arrive equipped with the necessary academic skills (Skillen et al 1999 p.3). This model of learning development is 'isolated from the curriculum and is on the fringe of academic study' (Percy et al, 1999, p.4). Indeed, Skillen et al (1999), Percy and Skillen (2001), DfES (2003) and Chapple and Tolley (2000) argue that learning development is more effective within the discipline-specific contexts. Percy and Skillen (2001, p.1) suggest that 'Curriculum is the bridge where all groups engage'. The need for academic skills to be taught within a disciplinary context is widely supported in the literature. This approach is based on the premise that a disciplinary context is required to make meaning of generic skills (Green, Hammer & Stephens, 2005; Ballard & Clanchy, 1995) where generic or academic skills are interwoven with the specific disciplinary discourses of departments (Moore, 2004; De la Harpe, 2000). Evaluations of teaching practices where embedding of academic skills occurs, attest to the effectiveness of this approach (Bath, Smith, Stein & Swann, 2004: Hirst. Henderson, Allan, Bode & Kocatepe, 2004).

Transferability of academic skills
Assumptions are made in higher education that students can transfer their academic skills from one subject discipline to another. Many academic programmes include generic skills modules which, while having some value are less effective than if the skills were embedded within the subject discipline. (Elander, Harrington, Norton, Robinson, & Reddy 2006). Essay writing skills need to be linked to content and explained and understood by the students. The inability of students to transfer these skills can lead to frustration and misunderstandings. According to North (2005) students who associate skills and norms with their own background discipline have difficulty adapting and transferring their writing skills to a different discipline approach. Entwistle and Tait (1995) point out that students may have different learning styles and use different learning strategies. Teaching and learning methods may emphasise different things in writing about their particular subject area. These points have implications for students who are studying multidisciplinary programmes which combine subjects such as Business and Social Science or History and Science. These points would suggest that students studying across disciplines need to understand the academic skills and expectations of tutors in the context

of the subject discipline.

'to negotiate the writing requirements of modularised or cross disciplinary courses, students may need above all to have flexibility to respond appropriately to different situations'. (North 2005) There are clear implications for teaching, learning and assessment strategies and student feedback methods and language.

Institutional models of developing academic skills
Napier currently has an array of support mechanisms in place to address some of the issues raised which includes a student mentoring scheme, peer assisted learning and bridging and orientation programmes. These schemes are all centred on enhancing the student experience and aiding retention particularly with first year entrants. Feedback from students from these programmes confirms that they are valued and have influenced students decision to leave or stay on their programmes of study.

The approach to orientation and bridging courses at UTS is not at School level and although the courses endeavour to include subject specific material, attendance has fallen due to student time constraints and perception of the irrelevance of the courses to their studies. Trotter and Cove (2005) from Salford University conducted a series of focus group discussions and interviews with students leaving courses, asking how Induction or orientation programmes might be improved. Most responded- "Have one!" (p.34).

There is concern and commitment to academic student support but if it is removed from the context of the subject being studied it may not reflect the subject-specific skills needed, or the transferability of skills highlighted by North (2005).

Chapple and Tolley (2000) describe the effects of contract staff leaving, often at short notice, from the position of departmental leader. They found it disruptive to the effectiveness of the project and questioned whether short-term staff could have 'developed the knowledge of the curriculum' (p.14). Chapple and Tolley (P14) also suggest that without the benefit of 'support of the head of department and the co-operation of other colleagues, they are clearly working from a disadvantaged position from the outset'. This suggests the need for support for embedding to be seen to be coming from senior management.

Thus the institutional viewpoint that, 'the focus of the curriculum needs to shift from an emphasis exclusively on subject content to one that also includes a focus on skill development" needs to be activated to ensure systemic and consistent provision (De la Harpe et al., 2000). This has significant implications for academic

literacy lecturers in that 'they can play a vital role in the development of the new curricula by developing partnerships with mainstream lecturers '(Green et al., 2005).

UTS experience of embedding skills in the curriculum
After the 1997 internal review of teaching and learning, a change in institutional attitude towards educational strategies developed. School Teaching and Learning Committees and Heads of Schools acknowledged the growing diversity of the student body and the emerging need to implement a system that would bridge the 'expectation gap' between student and lecturer perception of university assessment requirements. A move to integrating language development into the curriculum of mainstream subjects in faculties arose. The adoption of an academic integration approach is now aligned with key objectives stated in the UTS Strategic Plan. Serving the diverse student cohort necessitates modes of provision that mainstream best practice, without an increase in staffing levels. This is best achieved through a systematic integrated approach of collaboration between stakeholders. Thus the academic learning advisers of the ELSSA Centre and the disciplinary specialists have developed partnerships in various faculties at UTS.

Examples of effective systematised support at UTS
Examples of effective systemised support in the Faculty of Nursing, Midwifery and Health include academic literacy lectures embedded in core first year subjects and parallel optional workshops, a Clinically Speaking Programme that develops spoken language for the clinical environment and a collaborative project targeting 'at risk' students. The Faculty of Engineering offers different language ability strands of a first year core subject, Engineering for Sustainability, and a second year Engineering Communication programme, both of which are taught by subject lecturers and language advisers.

Case Study: Sociocultural Foundations of Leisure, Sport and Tourism (UTS)
This paper presents a case study of a first year core subject in the School of Leisure, Sport and Tourism, in the Faculty of Business. The subject, Sociocultural Foundations of Leisure, Sport and Tourism (SCF), is undertaken by the entire first year cohort. The skills of critical analysis, referencing and academic essay writing are taught within the substantive content of the subject. Embedding academic skills is achieved by including a lecturer from the ELSSA Centre (academic support) as a member of the team who present two, two hour academic skills lectures aligned to the assessment tasks. The academic skills lectures are presented in weeks two and five and further developed in the subject tutorials following the lectures. Optional weekly workshops to

consolidate and practice the skills are offered by the ELSSA Centre. The organisation of academic skills

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┌─────────────────────────┐
│ LECTURE                 │
│                         │
│ Critical analysis       │
│ Referencing             │
│ (ELSSA Centre)          │
└─────────────────────────┘
      ┌──────────────────────────────┐
      │ TUTORIAL                     │
      │ Application of critical      │
      │ analysis                     │
      │ (Subject tutors)             │
      │ Assessment                   │
      │ Short essay trial            │
      │ No marks recorded            │
      │                              │
      │ Feedback given               │
      └──────────────────────────────┘
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Week 2

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┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│ LECTURE                         │
│ Feedback on critical analysis   │
│ trial assessment                │
│ Academic (longer) essay writing,│
│ process/structure               │
│ (ELSSA Centre)                  │
└─────────────────────────────────┘
      ┌──────────────────────────────┐
      │ TUTORIAL                     │
      │ Writing an argument paragraph│
      │ Group work                   │
      │ (Subject tutors)             │
      │ Assessment                   │
      │ First of 3 marked short      │
      │ essays due in two weeks      │
      └──────────────────────────────┘
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Week 5

Diagram 1: Organisation of academic skills lectures and subject tutorials to align with assessment tasks.

lectures and subject tutorials to align with assessments is presented in table 1 (p 11).

Evaluation of the programme

Qualitative research has been undertaken to determine the effectiveness of the programme. The 2005 research involved interviews with SCF Lecturers and those who teach the students in later semesters. Student focus groups conducted in 2003 and 2004 and UTS student evaluation feedback sheets provided student perceptions of the programme. Members of the subject team endorse the method of organisation, indicating the complementary nature of the lecture, tutorial and assessment and the fact that the substantive content of the subject is used to introduce and practice the skills and facilitate student learning. Students indicated that

the implementation of a system that introduced specific academic skills related to subject assessment enabled them to adopt the skills effectively.

Lecturers reported a significant improvement in writing skills, indicating that *prior to the programme they were nowhere near the quality they are now*. Lecturers indicated that critical analysis, which had previously confused first year students, is now articulated more effectively in SCF and in later years. Students indicated that the programme effectively teaches the link between reading and critical analysis. Further, the demonstrably improved use of literature to support points made indicates a valuable contribution to student writing and referencing techniques.

Students indicated that being explicitly taught referencing skills significantly helped demystify tertiary writing. They also noted the importance of the feedback after the first assessment in ensuring they were complying with lecturers' expectations.

Lecturers in subsequent subjects reported they were able to focus more on subject content after the programme, when formerly tutorials were used to instil academic skills. It is interesting to note several lecturers who teach the students in later semesters commented on students' improvement in concept knowledge as a consequence of the programme. This unexpected outcome has been commented on in similar case studies (Bath et al, 2004) Students reported gaining academic skills, (both in the lectures and optional workshops), increased confidence, resulting in less stress, more comfort and control completing tasks and that motivation increased as a result.

Outcomes linked to retention

The embedded literacy programme explicitly addresses retention issues as identified by Yorke (2004), and Quinn et al (2005). It emphasises support in the crucially important first year. Formative assessment and specific feedback after the first assessment task ensures students are aware of the lecturers' expectations. The embedded support is systemised and ongoing, giving students a direct pathway for academic skills development. 'At risk' students may be identified by means of the first feedback assignment which does not have a recorded mark, or the optional extra workshops, where the more formal setup and collaborative learning methods remove the stigma of requesting further assistance. The workshop collaboration directly links to the retention issue of lack of social integration. Students commented in the focus groups on the favourable assistance given to their academic skills development, but they considered that the partnerships and friendships that arose from participation in the workshops were of most benefit.

Significantly, both student and subject lecturer perception of academic support staff has altered as a result of an embedded academic skills programme. Such a programme presents academic advisers as 'mainstream', thus moving away from previous perceptions of academic skills support as a deficit model of learning as recommended by FACE (2003). An important consequence of this programme is that more subject lecturers are requesting integrated academic support and workshops directly aligned to assessments and significantly more students are attending optional ELSSA Centre workshops. This is quantified in graph 1 which presents numbers of leisure, Sport and Tourism students attending ELSSA Centre workshops from 2001-2005..
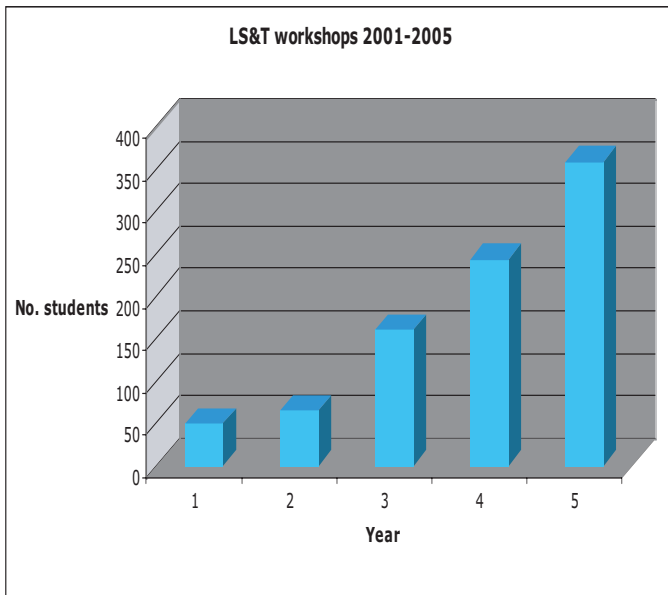
Graph 1. Numbers of Leisure, Sport and Tourism students attending ELSSA Centre workshops 2001-2005

Conclusions

The literature on retention suggests that there are a range of factors for institutions to take into consideration when reviewing strategies which will enhance the student experience and improve retention. The authors argue that an embedded model of academic support can be used to engage students and improve their understanding of what is expected of them within the context of their subject discipline. The case study from UTS illustrates an example of an integrated approach by lecturers and academic support lecturers which has produced positive outcomes for the student learning experience. Programmes integrating support systems into the institutional mainstream, 'need to be widely discussed to enhance their credibility, efficacy and use' according to Lawrence (2002, p11). More work needs to be done to disseminate the effectiveness of programmes otherwise they tend to be invisible in the wider context of the university. Although examples of successful teaching innovations are published regularly, there is a need for

researchers publicising programmes to provide disciplinary quantifiable evidence of their effectiveness.

The difficult part of research in this field is providing the evidence that this approach is effective. Student and tutor feedback and anecdotal comments while encouraging do not provide enough hard evidence to convince Departments, Faculties or Institutions who prefer to have statistics to back up any claims.

The authors of this paper intend to carry out some action research, evaluating existing programmes and look at templates for future academic embedded support in programmes. Any investigation will look at the key factors that make a difference to the students through using a qualitative approach and involving staff and students. Retention is a complex issue but the authors suggest that embedding academic skills in the subject discipline with involvement from academic support advisers and lecturers can aid the confidence of the students which combined with social integration can aid retention.

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8. Empowering the learner through enhanced engagement informed by reflective practice

Ian Smith: Napier University

Summary
The School of Computing, Napier University has had an enlightened approach to first year studies for a number of years exemplified by the Personal Tutoring Scheme, a Professional Skills module and a dedicated Special Needs tutor. This presentation will discuss how reflective practice has informed developments to the curriculum that have been initiated to better engage the students and further enhance the overall learning experience. The effect on student engagement is explored through case studies and student attitudes determined by independent study will be presented and discussed.

The underlying rationale of the approach is to empower the student and encourage personal ownership of their learning. Personal Development Planning (PDP) is regarded as central to the strategy. An enhanced induction process and a new Professional Development module have been conceived to inform and enable professional development. The new module has been integrated into the first trimester in a manner that utilises and builds upon learning achieved in three other concurrent modules. The content of the module has been developed to accommodate contemporary digital technologies and the new literacy skills required by current graduates.

Keyword
PDP / First Year / Engagement / Enculturation / Curriculum Design

Background
> "PDP is not a bolt on extra, it is the logical development of an integral to good teaching. It can only happen if supported by teachers who are reflective practitioners themselves"

Elaine Smith paraphrasing William Houghton in Personal Development Planning for Student Retention and Progression in Engineering (2003)

Nationally there has been a noticeable reduction in recruitment to computing and information technology courses over recent years. This coupled with poor progression and retention (BBC, 2004) has been a focus of concern for Higher Education institutions the breadth of the UK.

Within Napier University, the issue of recruitment has been addressed by way of an institutional portfolio review. With respect to retention, a range of initiatives were set up at institutional, faculty and school level to address the issues under the auspices of the Retention Steering Group.

The School of Computing, Napier University has a common first year for two programme suites incorporating twelve programmes. This approach has the advantage of facilitating transfer between programmes in later years but causes issues with respect to the design of relevant and engaging modules appropriate to each of the different programme routes.

Fostering Student Engagement
Learning, Teaching and Assessment (LTA) practice developed within the School of Computing (Smith, 2004; Smith & Stewart, 2004) has been demonstrated to have a positive impact on student engagement and individual achievement. Key factors identified were: challenging coursework; choice within assessment; group work; regular meetings with a tutor; student tracking; early intervention; and weekly personalised email to all students. The approach resulted in a Level 2 module of 162 students having an average weekly attendance of 87%[1], a pass rate of 99%[2], and progression rate of 92%[3].

Personal Tutoring
The School of Computing has had a Personal Tutoring Scheme (PTS) for five years but the initiative appeared to have minimal impact on first year retention. A Personal Tutorial Group (PTG) comprises six students and a personal tutor who meet on a weekly basis during the first trimester. Over the last few years a number of different approaches have been taken within the scheme in an attempt to promote engagement and directly address retention and progression.

a. The Bakers Dozen (2004)
The group comprised 13 first year students from the same programme. The group met with the personal tutor weekly in the first trimester with individual meetings on request. Each student received a weekly, personalised email from the tutor. A group website, The Bakers Dozen, linked to personal websites was developed to engender a group identity.

At the end of the trimester, 2 students had withdrawn: 1 transferred to a different degree course in Glasgow and 1 disengaged. This compared favourably with the overall retention for the first year.

b. The A Team (2005)

The group comprised 24 first year students, a mix of 3 different programmes but constituting Teaching Tutorial Group A. The group met with the personal tutor weekly in the first trimester with individual meetings on request. Each student received a weekly, personalised email from the tutor. The students were introduced to the concept of PDP through a personal interview with their tutor that required the completion of a reflective report prior to the meeting.

An esprit de corps was engendered in a number of ways. A website, The A Team, linked to personal websites was developed. Student leaders were identified, peer mentoring encouraged and the group organised two social activities during the trimester.

At the end of the trimester, 3 students had withdrawn: 1 considered himself "not ready for HE"; 1 to accept an offer of employment; 1 due to the financial burden of "new family commitments". The group were part of the PDP pilot to be discussed in the next section and as a whole perceived themselves to have had a better-quality experience compared to the rest of the first year.

Personal Development Planning (PDP)
In 2005 it was agreed by Napier's Employability Steering Group (NESG) that personal and professional development planning (PDP) within Napier University would be promoted by running three small pilots, involving students from three Schools. These would be run to help inform the guidelines, principles and activities being developed to underpin personal and professional development planning within the institution. The three pilots were initiated involving students from: School of Computing, School of Law and the School of Marketing & Tourism and in each case PDP was introduced in a different way.

Each pilot was subject to an independent evaluation that incorporated informal semi-structured interviews with students; student questionnaires and informal feedback from a group of staff. The key findings (Westwood, 2006) documented below were used to inform the innovations implemented in the first year experience.

Key Messages from the PDP Pilots
1. All students providing feedback are strongly in support of the concept of PDP.
- They liked the idea of an aspect of their programme being about them and their progress.
2. PDP needs to be built into the programme from the start, rather than added onto it at a later date.
- Students saw this as a strong indicator of the University's and School's commitment to, and valuing of, PDP.
3. PDP seems to work best with a well-planned combination of group and individual activities.

- Students liked being part of a small group (c 25) but needed to be encouraged to carry out personal activities alongside (see 5 below)
4. The promotion of PDP was an encouragement for, and reminder to, staff to carry out previously used (and useful) activities, e.g. diagnostic testing for "at risk" students – now available electronically in an accessible and user-friendly format.
5. Students who had undergone a positive PDP experience to date (within 10 weeks of their programme) talked about having a "much better deal" than their colleagues who hadn't.
   They articulated the benefits as:
- feeling valued and supported
- feeling more motivated and committed (by the enthusiasm & commitment of their tutor)
- having a strong sense of group identity/belonging
- having an obvious and natural point of contact
- developing an awareness of themselves in relation to where they were aiming/ planning to go professionally
- developing an understanding of how their programme could help them achieve their goals - whether these goals were firmly formed or only emerging.
6. The PDP process and associated activities could provide an effective focus for helping students make sense of their programme by 'joining up' its modular parts.

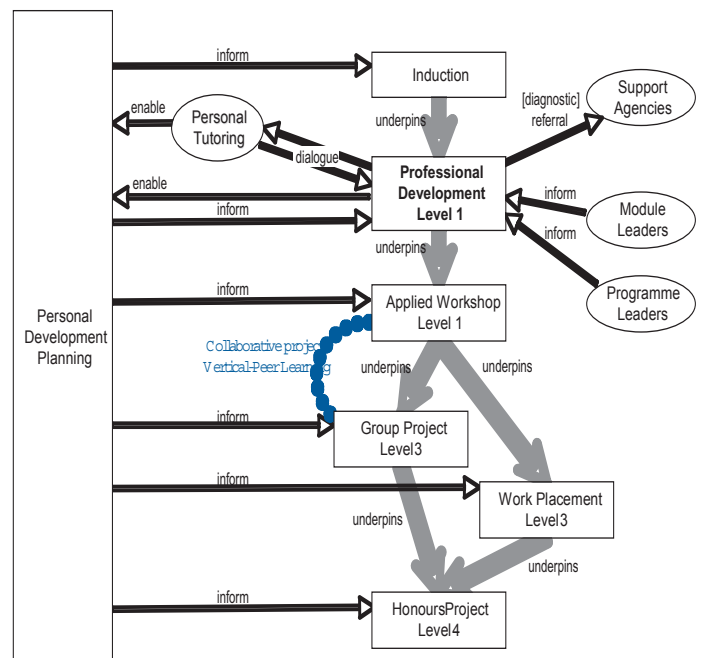Source: Westwood, 2006

Figure 1: Integrating PDP into the Curriculum

The first year team firmly believes that PDP is integral to student engagement and must be embedded in the wider curriculum (Figure 1) in conjunction with appropriate support mechanisms. In taking this forward it was agreed that the first year would be organised around the Teaching Tutorial Group of 24 students comprising 4

Personal Tutorial Groups of 6 students as this reflects the findings of the PDP Pilots evaluation (Westwood, 2006) and research carried out at University of Westminster (Hill, 2005).

First Year: Innovations for 2006/07
The annual review of the first year experience highlighted a number of issues. The students expressed concerns about the Professional Skills module in the first trimester commenting on the patronising approach, boring content and lack of academic challenge. Key concerns of the second trimester were lack of engagement and a dip in retention that were attributed to the cessation of personal tutorial groups in trimester 1; poor choice and availability of electives; and the relevance of the Workshop Module.

After a period of reflection and consultation the first year team came up with an action plan with six key initiatives to inform and enable personal development and promote student engagement.

- Enhanced Induction
- Technology-Assisted Tracking System
- Vertical-Peer Learning
- ePortfolio
- Additional Electives
- Professional Development module

These initiatives are described in the following sections.

Induction
Napier University and Napier Student Association organise a range of events during Freshers Week (Week 0) detailed in the induction pack sent to the students with their joining instructions. In 2006/07, enhanced induction activities will be delivered within the School of Computing over a three-day period during Week 0 and the induction period extended into the early weeks of trimester 1 as detailed below.

Day 1
Animal Vegetable Mineral (Socialisation): 2 Hours
On arrival the students are given a coloured card on which is printed the name of an animal, a vegetable and a mineral followed by a very brief introduction. The coloured cards facilitate the forming of different groups for four separate icebreaker activities. At the end of this period each student should feel part of the larger group and have developed initial impressions of the other students.

Urban Orienteering (Forming Groups): 2.5 Hours
The students are given 15 minutes to form themselves into groups of 5 or 6 using a set of rules to minimise risks of social isolation (e.g. a group should not include only one female or one male student, a group should not have only one under 18 year old etc). Each group is

given set of questions related to locations around the campus that required to be answered and an associated map. They are instructed to complete the orienteering task, have lunch and be back by a specified time. The team(s) with the best scores are awarded a prize. At the end of this session the students will have bonded into groups and discovered their way around the campus.

Personal Tutors (Enculturation): 2 Hours
Each group is constituted as a Personal Tutorial Group (PTG) and allocated a member of staff as their personal tutor (PT). The tutor ensures each student has the required documentation, completed the student profile forms and authorises matriculation. The tutor issues the student timetables and schedules a weekly PTG meeting. The students are then taken through an orientation process that includes a visit to the school office, an introduction to the school website, the use of the student diary and the key contents of the student handbook.

Day 2
This day is set aside for administration events such as matriculation and the induction sessions organised by Library & Information Services, C&IT Services etc. The Year 1 Leader and PTG tutors are available during this time to deal with any problems.

Day 3
The students are given formal introductions by the Head of School, Year Leaders etc. This is followed by a Study Skills Pantomime featuring members of the First Year Team. The morning concludes with a Topical Quiz with the students participating within their personal tutorial groups. The Quiz makes extensive use of audio and video and makes oblique reference to members of the module teaching teams. The students conclude the day with a visit to the Freshers Fair.

Week 1 and beyond
Enculturation and orientation continue to be addressed within the personal tutorials and the professional development module during the early weeks of the trimester.

Technology-Assisted Tracking
In previous years, class attendance has been monitored through paper-based registers that required manual transcription into an electronic spreadsheet for subsequent analysis. This process though labour intensive and cumbersome has shown to be effective in enabling early intervention (Smith, 2004; Smith & Stewart, 2004) to improve engagement. The First Year Team in collaboration with Napier Student Retention Project have been successful in putting together a pilot study of a technology-assisted tracking system[4] utilising hand-held technologies to monitor student attendance.

This system has been successfully integrated within the University of Glamorgan (Bowen et al, 2005) to good effect.

The system, rebranded by Napier University as Tracker will allow fast and effective collation and analysis of the data facilitating early intervention using SMS and email. This will be followed up with individual letters in a manner similar to the "Traffic Light System" (Smith & Beggs, 2004) pioneered by Glasgow Caledonian University.

Vertical-Peer Learning

Student feedback on the first year experience questioned the relevance of the group-based Workshop module. This year as an alternative, a group of first year students were given the opportunity to collaborate in similar group work with post-graduate students in a level 5, Production Management module. The first year students rose to the challenge and achieved levels of attainment above that expected or required.

Vertical-peer learning is not a new concept within Computer Science (Parslow, 1980), indeed the approach was used within the School of Computing ten years ago but without academic credit. It is the intention to formally integrate the vertical-peer learning into the curriculum in trimester 2 (see figure 1) to facilitate collaborative projects with the level 1, Workshop module and the level 3, Group Project module. Teaching groups within the School have been approached to initiate subject specific projects that have relevance to the various programme routes to promote engagement.
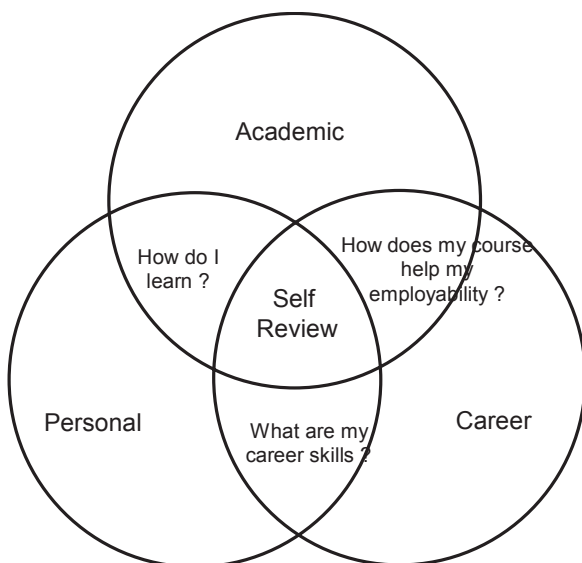
Source: Effective Learning Framework (ELF), QAA Scotland

Figure 2: Effective Learning Framework Mode

ePortfolio

The students will be expected to engage in self-review in the later years of study and to this end will be required to collate and store their portfolio of artefacts and personal development plans. It is expected that the range of artefacts will include text, images, audio diaries and video diaries and therefore an ePortfolio will be required.

After considering a range of possible solutions, it has been decided to use the WebCT Portfolio[5] as it is fully integrated with WebCT Vista[6] the university's managed learning environment with which the students will be very familiar.

WebCT Portfolio allows the students to determine which artefacts to include, create different views of their portfolio and control access to staff, students and guests. An associated blog can be used to annotate individual artefacts and reflect on personal development.

Electives

The first year students complained about a lack of choice of electives in the second semester. The team have addressed the issue in a number of ways. The elective selection process has been incorporated into the new Professional Development module to ensure the students are aware of the range and availability of appropriate modules. Teaching groups within the School have also been approached to develop at least two new elective modules for the new academic year.

Professional Development

This module to be taken by all first year students within the School has been conceived for Session 2006-07 with a strong emphasis on Personal Development Planning and particular reference to the Effective Learner Framework (ELF, 2005), a model that attempts to frame personal development planning (PDP) with respect to effective learning as shown in figure 2. Self –review is enabled through Focused Learner Questions (FLQs) that are firmly integrated into the academic curriculum.

The underlying rationale of the approach is to empower the student and encourage personal ownership of their learning. The module has been integrated into the first trimester in a manner that utilises and builds upon learning achieved in three other concurrent modules. In addition the content of the module has been revised to accommodate contemporary technologies and the new literacy skills required by current graduates.

Enculturation is fostered through personal tutoring and groups formed during induction week. Each student belongs to a group of 24 that is the basis of all tutorials and practicals in the first year. As the consequence of a successful pilot, from next year each tutorial group will meet with a dedicated group tutor for a weekly meeting

geared towards bonding and socialisation. Professional development is engendered through regular meetings with a personal tutor.
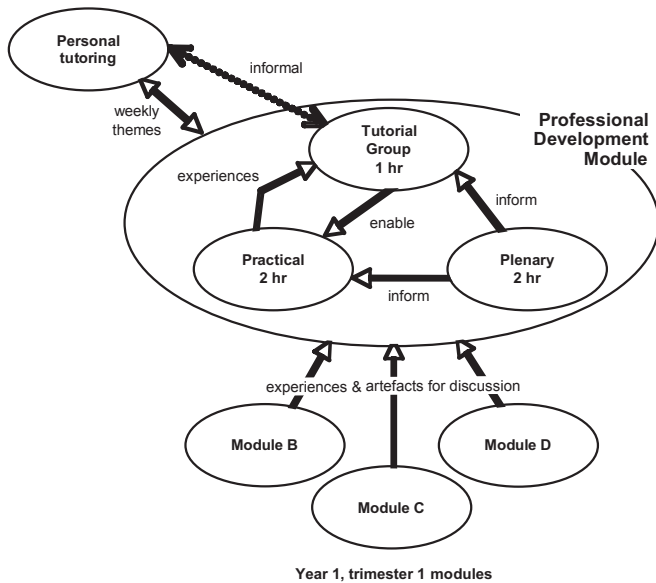

Year 1, trimester 1 modules

Figure 3: Module Structure

Module Learning Outcomes

The module learning outcomes were developed in consultation with stakeholders and educationalists with reference to the ELF model within the context of the Computing and Information Technology disciplines.

On completion of the module students will be able to:
- Identify and comment on a range of skills and attributes that are considered either desirable or essential within the Computing and Information Technology industries.
- Relate their abilities, interests and aspirations to a range of career opportunities in Computing and Information Technology.
- Evaluate their own technical and interpersonal skills against social, academic and industry expectations
- Engage in a range of continuing personal, professional and academic development activities

Delivery

The module incorporates a blended learning approach with traditional classroom and laboratory sessions supplemented with web-based learning activities and resources. As shown in figure 3, the module utilises student experiences and artefacts from other concurrent modules and shares common themes with the personal tutorial groups.

As mentioned previously the module makes extensive use of Focused Learner Questions (FLQs) that are used as the basis of the individual learning events. The FLQs have been developed to encourage reflection and facilitate personal development. The following are two

examples that are used in the tutorial sessions:
- "What Career Opportunities are available in my chosen field?"
- "How do I get the essential and desirable skills for my future career?"

Plenary

This session comprising all the students is used to deliver the key theme of the week (e.g. Coping with Higher Education, Dealing with Assessment, etc). It is used flexibly on a week-by-week basis to include: breakout group activities, demonstrations, and class discussions utilising electronic voting systems. Presentations are also provided by external bodies, employers, agencies within the university, alumni and current students.

Tutorial

This learning experience has a very informal approach with tutors selected for their subject specific knowledge and enthusiasm for their respective disciplines. The class size is the teaching tutorial group of 24 students comprising 4 personal tutoring groups of 6 students all from the same programme suite. The students develop knowledge about their chosen subject specialisms through activities related to the overall module objectives. FLQs encourage reflection and discussion.

Practical

This is time period is used to develop skills in contemporary digital technologies and a range of literacy skills. The students are introduced to the managed learning environment, ePortfolios, blogs and wikis; in addition to the use of more traditional tools such as Word, Excel and PowerPoint.

FLQs are used to direct the learning experience towards the key assessment tasks. Diagnostic tools are used to determine the need for individual support, which is provided by academic staff and small team of second year student tutors. Extensive use is also made of web-based materials and support tools.

Assessment

Successful completion requires the student to demonstrate self-appraisal, critical reflection and planned personal development, which is determined by way of a reflective report, a personal development plan and an associated portfolio of artefacts. All to be retained by the student, for use as the basis of self-review in subsequent years.

In putting together the portfolio, students are required to complete a set of tasks that are used to: determine technical skills and competencies; determine and develop traditional literacy and digital literacy; develop professional skills; enable diagnostics; and provide

artefacts for the portfolio. Formative assessments on these tasks help students maximise their achievement.

Discussion

The team are confident that the integration of the various initiatives into the curriculum as a whole will enhance the overall learning experience, promote student engagement and empower the student.

However, there are factors that require to be addressed,

- A number of academic staff still remain to be convinced about the merits of the new approach. Success is dependent on maximising support across the School and this requires to be addressed by the team.
- As mentioned earlier, a range of initiatives were set up at institutional, faculty and school level to address the issues of progression and retention. This has resulted in a level of initiative-fatigue that is having a demotivating effect on already stretched staff. Associated with this is an emerging tick box culture with staff losing sight of the overall picture. It is hoped that the appointment of a Director of Student Experience within the School will facilitate a more strategic approach.

A final point to be considered is that of the empowered student and the evolving staff-student dialogue. Will our existing teaching staff and current approaches to teaching be able to come to terms with the confident student who has taken ownership of their learning and personal development?

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6. www.webct.com/products/viewpage?name=products_vista

9. Developing a Student Support and Retention Strategy for Part-Time Learners in the Context of a Conventional University

Judy Rumbelow, Darryl Bibby, Colin Black: Coventry University

Summary
The paper sets out to describe and compare two approaches to supporting part-time students at Coventry University. The contrast is explored between a customised curriculum explicitly designed for part-time learners and delivered by the School of Lifelong Learning, and the way in which part-time learners are integrated into a curriculum and service designed for full-time learners in the rest of the University. The issues engendered by each approach are discussed and analysed and Coventry University's response to improve the experience for all its part-time learners is outlined.

Keywords
Part-time students, Student support, Curriculum, Operations and finance, Part-time degrees

Introduction
Until recently, many part-time students at Coventry University have only had access to the support services designed for full-time students. From September 2006, the School of Lifelong Learning (SoLL) will be delivering part-time degrees specifically designed for those who intend to gain a degree over approximately six years. The School has gained knowledge of how to support mature part-time learners as a result of delivering an extensive short course programme over the past three years. Using this knowledge and experience they have developed a student support and retention strategy specifically for part time students. Alongside this, other Schools and Faculties in the University will continue to support part-time students who study a similar programme to full-time students but over a longer period of time, typically four years. SoLL is working with colleagues across the University to co-ordinate provision for part-time learners.

This purpose of this paper is to consider the differences in strategy, systems, procedures and approaches to supporting part-time learners in SoLL from those used by the rest of the University. It seeks to highlight the tensions and challenges associated with both approaches and to analyse how the learning gained so far at Coventry University might be relevant for colleagues providing part-time provision in other Institutions.

The paper sets out to compare the two approaches to student support and retention delivered within the University – the support specifically tailored to the needs of part-time learners delivered by SoLL and the support aimed at part-time learners who follow similar study patterns to their full-time colleagues in the rest of the University.

Supporting Part-Time Students in the School of Lifelong Learning
Almost all the provision of SoLL is designed explicitly for students who study part-time. More than 80% of these learners are over 25 and until the advent of part-time degrees in Sept 2006, the majority will have been studying programmes of less than 60 CATS points. Typically, delivery of face to face sessions takes place in the evening in the University's Graduate Centre, though an increasing number of work-related programmes are delivered during the day, with a small number being delivered in the students' workplaces. Of the three part-time degrees scheduled to start in September 2006, the BA (Hons) Professional and Creative Writing and BSc (Hons) Multimedia and Technology will be delivered in evening sessions with additional face to face sessions at weekends over six years for a full degree. The BA (Hons) Project Management will be delivered on weekdays in the daytime over a period of four and a half years.

The team in SoLL which support students comprises four areas – academic, marketing, quality and administrative/operations. Most staff in SoLL are involved in student support and all team members regularly respond to student queries.

Curriculum
The SoLL curriculum is both designed and delivered to support the way in which part-time mature students study. The content of the curriculum is dictated by the School's markets and research strengths, while the size and shape of modules is specifically determined by student needs. Modules are delivered in a 'short/fat' timescale to ensure students can complete a module within one term. This contrasts with the 'long/thin' module delivery experienced by many full-time students where more than one module is delivered in parallel across more than one term. The 'short/fat' approach allows students to gain a sense of achievement after the shortest possible length of study time. It also offers the opportunity for delivery over a very short period of time – possibly an intensive two week period.

The content of the SoLL curriculum is heavily work-related. This direction permeates all aspects of what is

delivered. Module titles are explicitly work-related for example in the BA (Hons) Professional and Creative Writing, students have the option of modules entitled 'Writing for the Workplace' at levels 1 and 2. Assessment tasks often have a work focus - students studying the BA (Hons)Project Management are required to prepare reports and plans that they will use on active projects in their workplace. In preparing support materials, case studies are selected which have particular relevance to the nature of students' employment. Where a group from the same employer is being taught together the lecturer can further customise the student experience by the use of case studies or 'real-life' examples. Recently SoLL has pioneered dual accreditation for students studying its management courses with the Chartered Management Institute. This allows students completing these programmes to gain both HE certification and professional body recognition for the same programme.

Student Support

The system for student support in SoLL relies mainly on part-time sessional tutors supported by the administrative Tutor Support Team. The School makes a particular effort to ensure sessional tutors are involved with the quality assurance processes of the School. Sessional tutors sit on School Board and also regularly attend the Subject Assessment Boards to meet with external examiners. Tutors also take part in termly staff development activities which aim to ensure tutors get to know others who are working for the School. Each sessional tutor is allocated to a permanent member of academic staff for on-going support. When students start part-time degrees in September 2006, a certain number of tutors teaching at level 1 will also be contracted to offer personal tutor support to students on degree programmes throughout their study with the School. Each student on a degree programme will be allocated to a named member of administrative staff who can offer support with any of the administrative processes which the student will need to undertake.

Operations and finance

The way in which the curriculum is delivered and students are supported in SoLL necessitates specific approaches to operations and finance that are different from the majority of University business. Many classes take place in the evening or weekends which require special arrangements to be made for access to rooms and catering outside the times normally serviced by departments such as security and technical support. Offsite delivery, for example at workplaces, raises a different set of organisational challenges, and the School regularly needs to send administrative staff to the delivery site to ensure the smooth running of processes such as enrolment and remote access to University IT systems. As a result of many of the School's modules

being delivered over a short period of time and most students joining the School for one short course at a time, special systems have to be put in place to support their needs. For example, the School holds three Subject Assessment (Exam) Boards per year so that students' results can be confirmed as soon as possible after completion of the module they are studying.

The way in which students pay for their programmes of study also varies in the School. Payment can be received from the individual at the start of their study or the School can be required to invoice employers for a group of students who study with the School as a workplace cohort. These payments must be processed through the University's central finance systems, but the way in which they differ from payment methods used by conventional students can cause administrative problems.

Discussion of the SoLL Approach

The rapid delivery of module clusters over a short period of time typical of SoLL's provision can make it challenging to meet client needs and adhere to the University quality approval processes. The two stage University approval process hinges on meetings at monthly intervals, so the minimum time of approval for a programme is three months from inception. This can be problematic when commercial or public sector customers are seeking development solutions within a short timescale.

As the programmes SoLL delivers become more closely allied to vocational standards, the nature of module descriptors and programme specifications for which approval is sought necessarily change. Assessment methodology is more work-focused and there are critical decisions to be taken about issues such as pre-requisites. For example, decisions must be taken about the nature and type of work experience a student might need in order to undertake the assessment successfully for a particular programme. This can require a changed focus to the approval process from the more typically academic questions to assessments which explore practical work-related issues. Alongside a consideration of such practical questions the approval process needs to be sure that while attention is paid to vocational relevance, academic rigour is still applied.

The dual accreditation with professional awarding bodies which SoLL offers can also cause tension in the area of quality approval. Recently the size of modules has needed to be changed from 15 CATS points for a full module to 20 points, in line with University policy. To maintain SoLL's per module pricing policy for existing commercial customers and still meet the learning outcomes required by the dual awarding professional body, the content of modules has had to be redistributed

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between modules still within the confines of a Certificate and Diploma, and re-approved.

Delivering effective support for students with a team of tutors who are mainly on sessional contracts can also generate challenges. Many programmes within the short course programme are delivered over a period of only eight weeks meaning that tutors only have a relatively short period of time to get to know students. Several of the longer programmes comprise modules taught by different tutors. The delivery schedule of these means that students may only work with a tutor for five full days before moving to a different module and a different tutor. Full-time members of SoLL staff aim to provide continuity by visiting groups to check on progress, but where delivery is offsite this can prove time-consuming and can increase the cost of delivery to clients. Although this situation may not seem to differ much from that experienced by traditional students, SoLL students probably have less of a sense of attachment to the School as classes take place offsite or in the evening when there are fewer School staff available. Also sessional lecturers do not have offices or permanent bases within the University where students can call in for advice or to ask questions.

It is to be expected that operational tensions will arise in any University delivering across a variety of sites and at different times. With SoLL courses, however, operational difficulties often do not come to light until times such as evenings and weekends when many of the support services are not available to deal with operational problems. It can also be hard for sessional lecturers who are less familiar with the way in which University systems work to solve such problems and information about difficulties often have to be passed to full-time administrative staff to rectify the next day. While this in itself is not problematic, the chain of communication is more time-consuming and there is more potential for confusion.

Part-Time Students in a Full-Time Context
Throughout the rest of the University there are approximately 6000 part-time undergraduate students. The term 'part-time' is an umbrella term which applies to varied study trajectories from students who take six years to complete a degree studying at 50% of the full time rate to students who complete a full three year degree in four years. In most cases these part-time students attend lectures with their full time colleagues, but simply undertake fewer modules per year. The approach to managing part-time students varies widely between faculties particularly in relation to support systems with some student groups having a full time lecturer specifically to support them and others using the same system as full-time students.

The dominance of the full-time curriculum
In the schools and faculties other than SoLL the dominant curriculum is designed for full-time students. Part-time students tend to simply study full-time courses at a slower rate than students studying full-time. This has considerable implications for their study, for example graduate first employment is an important outcome for full-time students seeking their first job and the full-time curriculum is designed explicitly to support this, to the extent of including a half module at each level with a defined employability focus. For the part-time student who is already employed, this aspect of the curriculum may be less relevant.

The timetabling of delivery also emphasises the dominance of the full-time curriculum. Part-time students will be expected to attend sessions during the day. Throughout the year attendance will be required on a variety of days of the week which can make it hard to combine study with substantial employment. The modular nature of delivery can also mean part-time students have long periods of time where they are not attending University which can lead to feeling isolated from their study and fellow students. With such irregular attendance the implications of missed sessions whether due to lecturer non-attendance or for the student's personal reasons can have more serious implications than for a student studying full-time.

Marketing and enquiries
The marketing of degree courses and the handling of subsequent enquiries is also dominated by the study patterns of full-time students. Although a part-time prospectus is prepared, it is printed and sent out at the same time as the full-time prospectus which assumes that part-time students will be seeking a place at University at the same time as full-time students. This is unlikely as at present part-time students do not have to fit in with the time constraints of the UCAS admissions system. The prospectus is dispatched using similar mailing lists and to the same locations as the full-time prospectus. This ignores the fact that many who would like to study part-time are over 25 and in work – and unlikely to be reached through the full-time education system.

When potential part-time students make an enquiry to the University they are currently guided to make their approach through the same systems as full-time students. The open days and other opportunities for learning more about the University are dominated by those provided for students coming straight from full-time education. Phone enquiries are directed to the relevant school or faculty, each of which has different ways of supporting and managing part-time students. At present there is no central support to advise part-time students on the ways in which the University might support them

to manage their study to fit work or other commitments.

University Strategy and Policy

University strategy and policy is primarily focused on full-time students, which is to be expected, however this has implications for schools and faculties offering opportunities to study part-time. Funding allocations are calculated on full time equivalents. This means that the funding calculations associated with part-time students will always be more complicated than those for full-time students. For schools and faculties, or for the University as a whole, to provide bespoke marketing, enquiry support or advice and guidance for part-time students incurs an additional cost which has the potential to be larger than the small additional funding weighting received for part-time students. Offering scholarships and bursaries to part-time students highlights this issue – where a part-time student studying at the rate of 60 points a year receives a scholarship there is the potential for twice the administrative costs in comparison with a full-time student.

University strategies such as the teaching and learning strategy and e-learning strategy are also focused on the study patterns and approaches traditionally taken by full-time learners. While in many cases approaches for part and full-time students may be similar there may be important differences particularly in areas such as student support where part-time students may not be able to access the services available to full-time students and may need help at times which would be considered 'out of hours' for full-time students.

Coventry University Response

The University has recognised that in order to offer part-time students the best possible experience of study, and to increase the number of students undertaking part-time study and lifelong learning, all aspects of provision that contribute to the experience of part-time learners should be reviewed. To address this issue a high level strategic working group has been convened by the Dean of SoLL to co-ordinate systems for part-time learners and share and implement best practice from both approaches described above. The group, with senior representatives from marketing and communications, finance, student services and schools and faculties, is refining existing processes and designing new ones to improve part-time student experience.

Conclusions

The tensions highlighted by consideration of part-time students in a full-time context are almost the direct reverse of those experienced by SoLL. In SoLL, difficulties are experienced because the processes needed for individual support differ from the University systems and small scale 'workarounds' have to be created to enable such customised support to be offered.

In the part-time provision in the rest of the University the service offered to part-time students suffers because their needs do not always fit with the dominant system. Neither approach provides a good solution for the student or the University – there are potential difficulties in offering the SoLL approach on a larger scale and the current approach of the rest of the University may make part-time study unattractive for potential students.

The two approaches described above appear to sit at either end of a continuum, where one puts the needs of the individual students first and the other emphasises the dominance of University systems. For practitioners in such situations, a similar process to the one being undertaken by Coventry University working group which recognises that a middle path which amalgamates the practice from both approaches should be considered. As this route is developed it will be essential that experiences are monitored both from the point of view of the part-time students experiencing it and from those who manage and work with University systems on a regular basis.

10. The experience of young people in higher education: factors influencing withdrawal

Lesley Sumner, Richard Ralley, Kate Grime, Alistair McCulloch: Edge Hill University

Summary

A key element of English government policy regarding Higher Education (HE) is its focus on widening participation and the closely related issue of retention. This is an important issue for the individual student, for whom withdrawal from a chosen course of action may have profound social and psychological implications. Measures from Health Psychology (HP) as well as a range of demographic variables and individual narratives are used to develop a formal approach to understanding the process of integration into HE, with a view to developing informed participant-led strategies for assisting culturally diverse young people through university. Initial results indicate significant differences between students who successfully complete their university education and those who withdraw. The quantitative findings are explored further in relation to student narratives and discussed with particular reference to retention and outcomes.

Keywords

Transitions / Widening Participation / Social Psychology / Self-esteem / Degree Outcomes / Social justice

Key issue

A key question in understanding the first year experience in Higher Education (HE) concerns its relationship to widening participation – do we expand entry at the expense of increasing withdrawal, and how does the HE experience impact on the individual? Government policy has established a framework to achieve the aim of 50% entry into HE by 2010. However, widening participation at a structural level is not the same as enabling successful participation by real individuals. The benefit of a social psychological perspective is that it examines psychosocial factors that influence the personal outcomes of transition, and the individual experiences that mediate that transition.

This longitudinal study explores the student experience using a range of measures from Health Psychology (HP) including Self-Esteem, Self-Efficacy, Coping, Perceived Social Support and Subjective Well-Being. These findings are explored in relation to individual narratives and a range of demographic variables, including parental experience of HE, pre-entry qualifications and non-direct entry. In this paper, we present some initial findings that reflect factors that influence student withdrawal, student experience, and student attainment through the HE experience.

Widening participation

The Government's proposals for widening participation targets 'bright young students from poorer backgrounds' (DfEE, 2001:1). Students come to University with a diverse range of individual histories, experiences, expectations and aspirations. In order to examine degree outcomes it is important to have some understanding of these issues. Traditionally Edge Hill has attracted students from lower socio-economic groups and those who live locally. It is well placed therefore both to understand and to explore the experience of those students that are currently the focus of Government design.

Simply encouraging more students to the HE experience does not necessarily predict positive outcomes, either at the individual or societal level. According to Tinto (2006) low-income students are disproportionately academically under-prepared. The Seventh Principle of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education developed by the American Association of Higher Education (Chickering and Gamson, 1987) states that good practice in undergraduate education respects diverse talents and ways of learning. Staff may need help in accommodating a range of learning styles and need incentives to change. Lorion (1991) states that diversity necessitates examination of one's own, often unspoken, assumptions about good and bad, about who people are and how they live, and about differences and similarities among people from different backgrounds and world views. It is predicted that research that informs our understanding of the impact of diversity on institutions and the impact of institutions on a diverse student body will enable the necessary change to ensure positive outcomes.

The contribution of psychology

According to the DfEE (2001) as we expand access, and participation in HE becomes the norm the HE system will increasingly underpin social justice. However, the researchers question whether this is automatically the case. The simple expedient of expanding access raises the crucial psychological issue of how participation can be made a successful experience for the individual and thereby contribute to a more just society. Without considering the experience of participation, the impetus behind this government-initiated action may not be in the best interests of the psychological well-being of those with unrealised potential, the supposed target groups. This is particularly important in an era of mounting student debt and increasing competition for graduate style employment opportunities. According to Parkes

(1996) one of the greatest challenges to educators is to meet the educational and personal needs of students entering higher education.

While widening participation is generally explored from a sociological perspective, examining phenomena such as age, gender and socio-economic status, the experience of life, of which HE is simply another facet, is essentially a psychological one. Such experience comprises influencing and being influenced by one's individual characteristics, such as the ability to cope, the sense of self-efficacy, self esteem and attitudes to significant others. A particular strength of psychology is in investigating how behaviours actually work in terms of how individuals evaluate situations and respond to them. For example, how the impact of events is mediated by the individual's level of anxiety, coping, social support, or self-esteem. Not only does psychology reveal particular mediators of the student experience, it also gives a broader view of the experience of transition.

To improve the lives and opportunities of young people living in the UK we need to understand their experiences from their perspective. It is important to gather their views on their environments, their relationships and on the services that they receive. Using a narrative approach in addition to the questionnaire survey and psychological measures attaches importance to the perspectives of those being researched. Where the general concerns of psychology have in recent years focused on developing general explanations of human behaviour, the use of narrative celebrates the individual. The subjective experiences of individuals can inform a socio-structural approach, recognizing the contribution of individual life stories or narratives to the overall picture of life as an HE student today.

Method

Student experience was investigated at induction and after graduation. Data from 216 Psychological and Social Sciences students who graduated in 2004 and 2005 are reported. These students are predominantly first generation entrants and not all enter by traditional routes: 68% have no parental experience of Higher Education and 29% have no 'A' levels.

The COPE scale (Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub, 1989) assessed individuals' preferred coping responses in the face of stress. These may be adaptive and positive (such as active coping, planning, and seeking instrumental support) or maladaptive (e.g., denial, disengagement from the problem, or focusing on venting emotion). The Generalized Self-Efficacy scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1993) measured individuals' beliefs in their ability to control demands and respond to challenges. While self-efficacy measured individuals' sense of can-do, perceived self-worth was recorded using Rosenberg's

(1965) Self-Esteem scale. The Significant Others Scale (Power et al.,1988) assessed the social, emotional and practical support provided by each individual's social network, including any perceived discrepancy between the actual and ideal amounts of support available. Subjective Well-being (e.g., current levels of anxiety and depression) was measured using Warr's (1983) questionnaire. Individual narratives (McAdams, 1996) invited participants to write freely and anonymously about their own lives and experiences of coming into Higher Education.

Results and analysis

Preliminary examination of the 2004 graduates revealed a tendency for a significantly more positive appraisal of stress to be made by the small group of 12 withdrawers in comparison to those who completed their degrees. (T-tests revealed that the responses of Active coping, Planning, Positive growth and Reinterpretation, and Acceptance of stress were all significantly higher in this group at p<.01). This suggested that withdrawals are often positive life decisions made by individuals. Once the samples were combined (2004 and 2005 graduates) there was no longer evidence for any significantly consistent difference between withdrawers and continuers in personal coping style.

However, educational background did yield significant differences in coping styles. Non-A-level entrants consistently employed more positive coping than entrants with A-levels. (T-tests revealed significantly higher Active coping responses, Planning, Positive growth, and Acceptance of stress, all at p <.05.) This may reflect a relatively passive continuation onto the HE pathway by former A-levellers, in comparison to those who enter HE through rather different decisions and routes. As a result, the question becomes one about those who stay as well as those who leave, with an accompanying need to unpick non-completion of degrees and degree achievement. This is addressed here using discriminant function analysis (DFA).

Discriminant Function Analyses

Following screening of the data, an analysis was run to reveal the factors that contributed to degree completion and non-completion. In the full sample, 28 students did not complete their degree and 188 did complete. Discriminant analysis revealed a significant overall association between completion/non-completion and a single function (Wilks' Ë=.91, X2(11)=20.71, p<.05). Table 1 gives overall correlations between the discriminant function and the variables in the analysis. These correlations aid simple interpretation of the nature of the function. Further analysis confirmed that possession of A-levels and direct entry into HE were significant factors that defined the function. Residence in university accommodation made a small but significant

contribution. Notably, parental experience of HE did not discriminate between completers and non-completers: it is being an A-level or direct entrant rather than being a first-generation entrant that counts.

Having A-levels, direct entry, parents with HE experience, and university accommodation each scored 1, as did completion of the degree, while a lack of these attributes scored zero. The correlations presented in Table 1 show that those who do complete their degree studies tend, in order of importance, to have A-levels, to be direct entrants into HE, and to not be resident in student halls. Conversely, those who do not complete tend not to have A-levels, to be non-direct entrants, and to be resident in student halls.

A-levels	.77
Direct entry	.43
In accommodation	-.25
Positive adaptation	.18
Parental HE	.18
Depression	.15
Self-esteem	-.15
Maladaptive coping	.13
Sibling HE	.11
Anxiety	.04
Self-efficacy	.02

Table 1. Structure of the discriminant function for degree completion/non-completion.

A second DFA assessed degree attainment. In the sample, a group of 48 were awarded Firsts and 2:i degrees, and 107 were awarded 2:ii or below. The DFA revealed an overall significant association between group membership and a single discriminant function (Wilks' Ë=.90, X2(11)=15.30, p<.001). Stepwise analysis revealed that only Direct entry to HE and Self-esteem contributed to the function, while the other variables were redundant. 73% of all outcomes were successfully

Direct entry	.75
Self-esteem	-.64
Age	-.46
Self-efficacy	-.32
Social support disparity	.29
A-Levels	.26
Gender	-.20
In accommodation	.18
Parental HE	.07

Table 2. Structure of the discriminant function for degree classification.

predicted by the model.

With higher awards scored as 1 and lower awards as 2, the correlations in Table 2 show that those who achieve a higher degree classification (1st or 2:i) tend not to be direct entrants into HE and to have higher self-esteem. Conversely, those who are awarded a lower classification tend to be direct entrants into HE and to have lower self-esteem. It should be noted that in the DFA direct entry is not confounded with age. Although older students did tend to get better degrees, age did not emerge as a factor that significantly contributed to achievement. The emergence of self-esteem as a factor underlines the importance of individual psychology to degree success.

Notably, neither A-level experience nor Parental HE made any contribution to achievement of a higher degree classification. Instead, non-direct entry into HE is crucial in degree achievement. The positive contributions of non-direct entry and self-confidence to achievement in HE may reflect psychological maturity and aspiration.

Summary of quantitative analysis

The most striking findings concern A-levels and direct entry into HE. A-levels are important in predicting degree completion, but have no impact on degree score. Direct entry into HE increases the likelihood of degree completion, but seems to militate against higher achievement. Those who do achieve tend to be non-direct entrants with a higher self-concept. The fact that self-concept plays a part in achievement confirms the importance of individual experience. This takes effect in terms of self-worth and a sense of can-do rather than coping style, and therefore will be unique to individuals and their life experiences. Coping style does not measurably differentiate between overall outcomes such as completion and non-completion and degree results, although adaptive coping may be associated with positive decisions to withdraw. Figure 1 summarizes the pattern of the results.

Narratives

Narratives generated themes and factors similar to those distinguished within the scales. As well as the fact of transition, which is a significant life change, educational background brings challenges to coping such as perceived disadvantage:

> 'One of the biggest worries of mine was the fact that most people on the same course as me had already studied A-level psychology and seemed to know a great deal more than I did therefore I felt at a disadvantage'

> 'I do feel that everything can be overwhelming at first. You have to go and find everything out for yourself. It is slightly reminiscent of being thrown in at the deep end.'

| Direct entry | → | lower achievement, less non-completion |
| A-levels | → | less non-completion, no contribution to achievement |

| Non-direct entry | → | higher achievement, more non-completion |
| High self-concept | → | higher achievement |

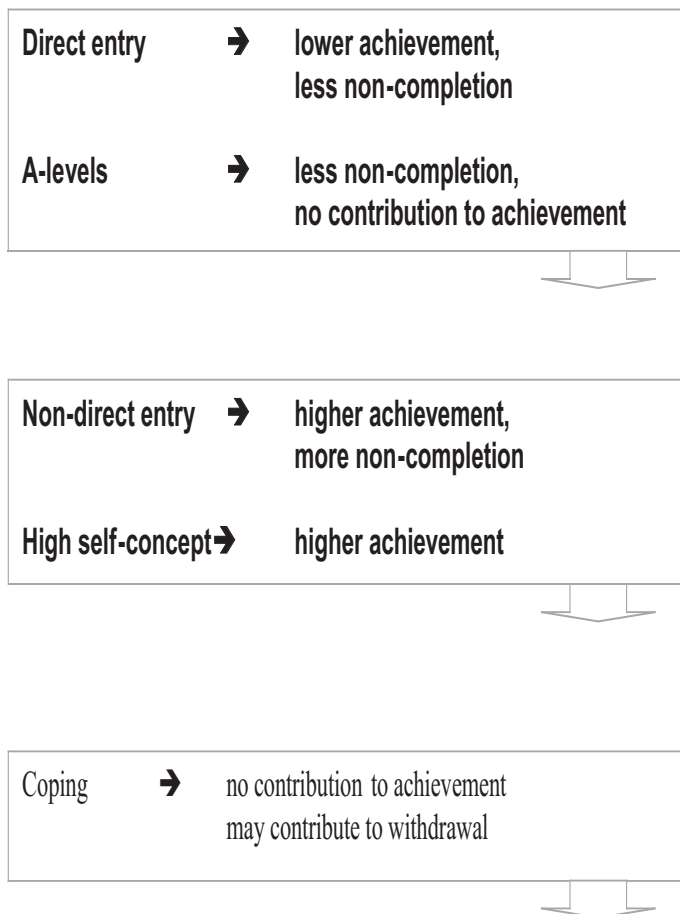| Coping | → | no contribution to achievement may contribute to withdrawal |

Figure 1. Summary of overall influences on the sampled degree outcomes (n=216).

Given the challenge, social support and significant others were an important resource:

> 'I was nervous, as any student would be, as I was living on campus, living with strangers and living away from home for the first time in my life… My mum was very supportive of me and she knew I had been through a hard time, my brother was supportive and excited as he had been to University and loved it and my sister was supportive and proud as she never went to university.'

> 'If they [the other students] had not been there the course would have been much more difficult, maybe even impossible.'

The anxiety that comes with transition can summon coping through positive reappraisal of the situation, and a sense of self-worth or self-esteem:

> 'I did have doubts about being a mature student and wondered whether I would fit in. When I started the course I found I was one of only a few, which came as a bit of a surprise, however, I focused on the positive aspects of my position like the fact I had life experiences to contribute and apply to my work.'

While there was relatively minor quantitative evidence for the influence of positive coping on a group-wide basis, adaptive coping strategies such as positive reappraisal are likely to be important on an individual basis, and these emerged in the narratives. Other strategies included active coping:

> 'The best way to tackle the first few days at university is just to start talking to people you don't know ….you feel more relaxed because you know some people and you are not on your own'

However, employing positive strategies such as planning was in itself a demand for some:

> 'I am not an organised person at all, so I don't actually know how to cope with being at Edge Hill'

The narratives show that coping is not just a characteristic set of responses that are employed by an individual. Instead, awareness of needs and relevant strategies may exist but the response remain latent:

> 'I do not seem to have the motivation to strive to achieve what I know I can. I am someone that needs support… I haven't really sought after this in the college itself'

Positive reinterpretation of challenges enables personal growth, and personal growth itself was an important theme:

> 'When I arrived at Edge Hill. I was filled with excitement and anticipation, as to what I would learn and the people I would meet, I was disappointed, as many of the students are more concerned with the student bar. As a mature student, I expected to find this distasteful, however it has given me a new lease of life and I have embraced it… I feel very happy and satisfied with my life'.

> 'Doing a degree is the best thing I ever did, it has made me grow up so much and has taught me so much about life.'

Finally, the importance of personal growth ties in with the results from the discriminate factor analysis that indicated that high self-concept and non-direct entry were important determinants of degree success. This could be loosely interpreted as psychological maturity, noting that chronological age was not a key factor. In the narratives, a similar theme emerged in the form of aspirations and seeking opportunities for growth:

> 'I have been a mother for 14 years, bringing up three children, ten of those years on my own. I have been in and out of education since my eldest was born, gaining the qualifications I did

not and should have gained in senior school… I have also found that being a mature student learning seems to be easier, as I seem to understand a lot more at my age than when I was younger, and I knew then and now that I am capable. I think this has a lot to do with growing up. I find myself knowing more and more what I want out of life and where I want to go.

Aspiration was also discussed by the younger entrants:
> 'The most important thing to me is that I'm happy and not stuck in a dead end job, I don't want to dread going to work each day as many people do. I would love to become a famous criminal psychologist or profiler but setting my sights slightly, my dream is to get into clinical psychology. To talk to people, listen to their problems and hopefully be able to help or offer some form of advice.'

Conclusions/points of departure

The results show that the psychological approach is beneficial, in this case revealing the importance of self-concept and individual profiles that increase the scope of the more frequently considered demographics. Government policy misses the individual by focusing on inclusion in a purely structural way. Individual factors influence outcomes for students (e.g. coping with stress, health and well being). Widening participation may in reality open the door to increases in psychological disadvantage, for example, through financial burdens, delaying life transitions, and the entrapment of completion or quick repayment upon drop-out. Divisive policies which demonstrate little awareness and understanding of the psychosocial fabric of people's lives do not enable young people to feel 'included' whilst undertaking HE. Such initiatives are not exemplary of social justice. Recognition of individuality and individual educational needs promotes social justice.

Traditional research by social scientists, other than psychologists, tend to locate causes in social systems. In contrast, the psychological focus on the individual implies relatively more immediate causes of behaviour. With the emphasis on diversity there is an increasing need for formal psychological investigation in order to understand youth experiences, attitudes, and well-being.

Statements made by individuals living within the relevant social group provide an important opportunity for constructing a picture of a social phenomenon from the perspective of those who, unlike government ministers, are living that phenomenon today, and who are rarely heard. For the student unused to the HE experience there may be a lack of understanding of levels of qualification, what these qualifications mean in real life, and of the HE culture and all that it entails. By the time students realise, it is too late to influence outcomes. In their turn, staff may hold many pre-conceptions about students' prior learning, their attitudes, what they should know how to do. Being informed about individual experience has practical significance. The mismatch between staff expectations and student performance may too easily lead to students being labelled as mediocre which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The reality may be they do not know how, information given does not translate easily into information understood, especially for students from different worlds. In using the narratives of participants the research focuses on the person, telling the story of their individual life and reflecting on their own existence. The approach demonstrates a commitment to ensuring that the young people central to the research are involved in and empowered by the process. In examining students' stories in relation to measures of psychological health and well-being we present a picture of experience that may contribute to informed policy that is translatable into a practice that contributes to a just system.

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11. Institutional strategies for retention at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona: improving Maths' learning

Monica Feixas and Dolors Quinquer: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain)

Summary

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) is the second largest State university in Catalonia. It has a firm policy to promote an adequate transition from post-secondary education to university. The average first year desertion rate is of 14,6% (2003-2004).

Mathematics is the UAB's degree with the highest students' desertion rate (43,3%), 60% of which takes place during the first year. Abandonment and low achievement are mainly due to the difficulty of the content, lack of motivation, a second or third career choice and due to different students' labour situations. In addition, Maths is also a mandatory first-year course in many degrees with an astonishing failure rate.

This paper presents the strategy UAB has carried out to increase retention and achievement in Maths courses: the "Mathematics Classroom", an imported project from Virginia Tech University. It consists of a real-on-line support system in a computers' classroom with permanent teaching supervision and on-line practice material.

Keywords

Retention / university students / first year / Maths / improving learning / desertion / institutional strategies / pedagogical strategies

About Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB)

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) is a young institution created in 1968, the first one in Spain since the Civil War. It was the beginning of a reform that aimed at modernising teaching in order to adapt to development needs and international trends. UAB could be considered as of international standing: due to the range of programmes it offered, its links with society, its emphasis on research; but, above all, because of its liberal character and the quality of its teaching staff. The model that was adopted was that of the complete university, the Campus model which successive Vice-Chancellors have attempted to nurture as far as possible.

Its first years coincided with the last years of the Franco dictatorship and the transition to democracy, which meant that it faced many hurdles during its consolidation, both of a financial nature, given the meagre resources that government allocated to the universities, and of a political nature, given its aim to contribute to the democratic recovery of the country.

UAB is now able to carry out these functions given an infrastructure that comprises:

a) Eleven faculties, a higher school of Engineering, two schools of its own and fourteen schools associated or linked to the University.

b) A community of over 50,000 people, made up of:

- more than 45,000 students, including postgraduate and Erasmus students
- almost 3,000 teachers and researchers
- nearly 2,000 administrative and service staff.

c) A budget of over 232 million Euros.

As many other universities, UAB has changed from being a university serving a minority of students to a mass university. This growth has introduced a great heterogeneity of students' profiles and cultures with diverse socio-professional development demands and interests. All these changes are provoking an in-depth reflection about the need of a new educational and organizational global strategy that responds to the needs of the actual higher education population in Europe. The main concern is now how to organize the academic and students' work in order to fulfil the objectives of the European Higher Education Space -signed in the Bologna Declaration in 1998-, one of the biggest concerns of most European universities.

UAB's strategies to promote an effective transition and foster retention

A university's reputation is based on excellence, and today's excellence can no longer rely on the quality of its academic staff or the achievement levels of entering students. According to Morgan (2005), a university's reputation for excellence includes how well it performs on factors that have a lot to do with retaining students: factors such as the responsiveness of administration, the service quality we provide for students and the learning climate they experience.

Over the past five years, UAB has established a firm policy to promote an adequate transition from post-secondary education to university and a global set of actions to increase retention. A general transition and retention strategy should achieve three main objectives: to maintain stable enrolments in order to support university's budget, to shorten the gap between secondary education and university education and,

finally, to foster students success and learning satisfaction of first year students.

UAB is carrying out different types of actions to promote a good transition and improve first year students' retention. Promoted by the institution's policy-makers, a plan has been developed to ensure total quality measures. They include:

- The Internal and External evaluation of degrees carried out by the Catalan Higher Education Quality Agency in order to diagnose weaknesses and strengths in every study or degree. This assessment allow the university to design improving plans that appear in the Internal Agreements of Planning.
- Through the Program Contract with the Generalitat de Catalunya (Catalan Government), the way economic resources were allocated in universities changed significantly: there is a basic allocation of ordinary, permanent incomes; and another provision of extraordinary resources which are conditioned to the consecution of specific objectives. For those degrees that hold high percentages of desertion, these objectives are linked to their capacity to improve retention.

From the academic and pedagogical perspective, there are another set of actions centred on the processes of transition from post-secondary education to the university and increasing retention. These include:

- Measures addressed to inform secondary school students: UAB teachers give conferences and inform high schools about the university, a UAB bus visiting main Catalan cities, UAB participation in educational fairs and exhibits, UAB teachers lectures in public institutions (town halls, cultural centres, etc.).
- Argó Program is a secondary-university transition program which puts in contact secondary education students with the university context. Secondary students need to carry out a research during their last year in high school; through the Argó Program, the students are assigned a university mentor and spend some weeks working with him/her and developing their research in the university facilities. Best researches are awarded a prize.
- Open doors activities last three days during which high school students visit university and are given basic information on every degree they are interested in by the Faculty deans and studies coordinators.
- Once registered, there is a Reception and Induction Program for new UAB students which may last from two to five days, depending on the degree. The set of activities organized within the program include guidance on registration procedures, information on introductory and mandatory courses, final career project (if any), specific degree's requirements (language skills, ICT skills, etc.) and all necessary information about the specificities of each type of study. Teachers, course coordinators and senior

students participate in this program.

- Student-Assessor Program is a peer-mentoring program established in most of UAB studies. Last year students which are enrolled in the program are assigned first year students. Their mission is to help them deal with difficult situations that usually appear during the first year such as resolve main worries about administrative procedures, help them decide optional courses, guide them during evaluations and exams, etc.
- Propedeutic and/or introductory courses are intended to reduce the gap between previous knowledge of first year students and required cognitive competences in a specific subject content.
- Flexibility of curriculum. Other options are not related to the content but related to the flexibility of the curriculum and the pace of study. These actions include the creation and use of ICT to permit a certain degree of flexibility in the way all students should achieve the same goals. ICT also contributes to the improvement of students-teacher interaction and the increasing of teacher feedback allowing a more personalized guidance and, in turn, an improvement of students' retention and academic success.

Finally, there are other general measures which embrace actions centred on improving the educational students' profile (Graduated Observatory) or centred on staff development and in improving university teachers' teaching (Teaching and Learning Training Unit).

Desertion at UAB

The universities efforts to keep retention are centred mainly in first year students because the higher percentage of desertion is in that moment. In the UAB, about 60% of the global desertion is produced in the first year. In our context, desertion is considered to happen when a student enrolled at any particular study does not register in any course for two consecutive years. Ours is a rigid system in the sense that students are expected to keep on progressing through their courses; no flexibility to get in and out of the career as they wish. They rather have the possibility of registering in less courses if, for example, work part-time.

At UAB, the average first year desertion rate is 14,6% (2003-2004). Table 1 shows the percentage of desertion in the UAB during 2003-2004.

The degree that presents a higher percentage of desertion in its first year is Mathematics, 43.33%, however Classical Philology in the first place of the table shows the level of desertion during the degree

The reasons of desertion are many and they are all related with:

1. **access**: students do not enter the desired degree

Titulaciones	1998/99		1999/00		2001/02		2002/03		2003/04	
	%ab1	%abg	%ab1	%abg	%ab1	%abg	%ab1	%abg	%ab1	%abg
Filología Clásica	43,24	57,66	43,18	59,09	43,01	60,22	41,62	60,15	34,01	59,39
Matemática	32,10	43,47	33,88	45,75	34,25	46,32	33,84	46,66	43,33	55,74
Física	37,92	46,79	36,99	47,23	37,27	50,31	36,45	50,87	36,52	53,40
Filología Francesa	31,56	43,58	32,28	45,77	32,06	45,29	32,09	45,77	29,05	43,58
Filología Catalana	20,92	28,01	24,77	33,18	25,67	35,54	25,44	36,73	30,99	43,52
Filosofía	27,75	40,00	27,74	41,07	27,50	41,47	28,04	43,66	25,88	43,44
Estadística	23,72	30,09	26,02	32,60	26,66	34,49	26,62	35,00	30,89	41,19
Filología Inglesa	17,15	28,22	19,32	32,46	19,54	32,83	21,14	36,06	23,39	39,02
Geografía	17,14	27,13	19,09	30,20	18,82	30,93	19,69	32,43	23,13	36,12
Filología Hispánica	15,56	25,64	15,92	28,42	16,27	29,76	16,44	31,29	17,89	35,03
Conjunto UAB	**13,15**	**20,45**	**13,53**	**21,33**	**13,66**	**21,96**	**13,85**	**22,71**	**14,61**	**23,3**
Periodismo	7,51	11,93	7,18	11,97	7,17	12,00	7,51	12,69	8,37	12,63
Maestro de Educación Especial	5,99	10,41	6,81	10,63	6,67	10,95	6,74	12,00	7,65	12,57
Publicidad y Relaciones Públicas	6,69	12,13	6,61	12,81	6,56	12,62	6,47	12,49	6,54	12,25
Traducción e Interpretación (Inglés)	6,06	12,81	6,01	12,13	6,24	11,97	6,28	12,13	6,33	11,90
Medicina	6,28	10,41	6,76	11,91	6,93	12,62	7,36	13,76	6,73	11,42
Veterinaria	5,29	9,59	5,41	9,93	5,25	10,44	5,59	10,72	4,69	9,29
Comunicación Audiovisual	6,82	11,06	6,85	10,75	6,77	11,00	6,64	10,68	7,05	9,02
Bioquímica	5,48	6,85	5,41	7,21	5,41	7,57	6,33	8,52	6,39	8,31
Ciencias Ambientales	2,83	8,49	3,81	8,99	3,47	7,19	3,72	7,87	4,67	7,15
Maestro de Educación Infantil	5,43	8,29	5,34	8,26	5,33	8,61	5,29	9,02	4,17	6,91

Table 1: Desertion in the UAB by degrees

because they do not have the needed mark.

2. **academic difficulties:** students encounter difficulties in following the delivered content, they do not understand the theory, do not know how to study for the exams or devote little time to study, are not prepared to become independent learners, etc. It implies a change in the "didactic contract" for all first year students and some are not ready.

3. **the students profile**: previous academic experience in secondary education, the need to combine work and study, the university demands, etc. Universities in our context are not prepared for nor like the idea of facilitating flexibility. First year students have to register in all mandatory courses, most courses require group work and continuous assessment, face-to-face lessons (mainly in first year), practice activities, etc. there are no many chances for part-time students or students working part or full-time to achieve successfully all required competences of a particular degree.

4. **lack of motivation**: the encountering of difficulties leads to less interest in the studies, to feelings of solitude and incapability. Students do not see many possibilities of success, they feel they are not able to accomplish the goals in the initial prevision of time… and end up abandoning.

During the course 2003-2004 in the Sociology and Political Sciences Faculty, Elías identified six profiles of motivations or situations that brought desertion in the Political Sciences and Sociology studies:

1. "Rubbish" (Rodríguez, 2001): All those students who start a degree because they do not have enough mark to go into the one they really want (normally Journalism or Audiovisual Communication or Publicity). This is recognised as one of the main reasons of desertion in Social Sciences. Those students who rapidly demotivate knowing that they have to study something they do not like, and bearing in mind that they have few opportunities to change their degree, they end up deserting.

2. Work: Those who work, normally, more hours than a part-time job and cannot do both things. They are used to expressing that it is not easy to study a degree in a slower pace, register of fewer subjects and avoid team work papers. They are the most motivated and have more positive expectations with their studies, however they have to desert because of their need to work. Enders & Fulton (2002) sensed the changes that the university need to do to adapt to this new type of student-worker.

3. Too theoretical: Those who consider that classes are boring, the teacher is only trying to transmit knowledge, few current topics are treated, there is no motivation to reflect on current topics. They have a vision or expectation more interventionist in the degree and they end up studying more social and participating degrees (Social Education, Social work, Social Integration…).

4. Atmosphere: Those students who express that they do not feel comfortable in that atmosphere, they do not share the protesting spirit of the majority of the group and do not feel comfortable.

5. Dislike: These interviewed students have difficulties in defining another more explanatory reason. They just claim that they do not like it, and they had other expectations from the degree and the university.

6. Not real: Students who are continuing with their studies but in another university, or students who have changed studies in the same university.

As other studies have claimed (Latiesa, 1992), we should bear in mind the variable of not studying the first option degree, which leads students to study other not

desired courses. We could think that the solution would be letting them choose what they really want to study, however we should consider that, in many cases, this is a last minute decision, not mature or not thought over, then it is not easy to find a good solution. Nevertheless, it is important to provide them with guidance when studying at secondary schools so that they can choose their studies according to their skills and academic and professional interests.

Other reasons for deserting can have other solutions or ways to approach. Actually, there are more pedagogical strategies, either institutional or individual. Most of them deal with the capacity of a degree to create new synergies and develop innovative teaching models that allow at-risk students make their itinerary flexible and get academic support to overcome difficulties.

Improving Maths' learning:
Maths is the degree at UAB with the highest students' withdrawal rate (43,3%), 60% of which takes place during the first year.

Science degrees, engineering, medicine, veterinary and other social sciences have a compulsory subject of Mathematics in the first year. The failure in these subjects, whether the students do not sit the exam or they fail it, it is also overwhelming.

Being confronted with such situation, Maths' teachers decided to undertake a project to detect main problems and establish a set of measures to improve Maths' learning. The conclusions they arrived at after testing students of Geology (one of the studies with high level of failure) were the following:
- Students have a low level of knowledge and competence in Maths (concepts, problem solving, etc.) when entering university, although having studied the sciences path in high school.
- They do not have enough time to execute the problems, which makes it difficult for them to practice until they can master the concepts.
- The way Maths are taught is very different in university, compared to how it was taught in secondary education. At university the pace is faster, the study methodology is different, there is a need of higher reasoning skills, more student autonomy is required, etc.

With these results, teachers decided about a set of measures:
- to adjust the program to the students' level
- to introduce an introductory course. Although they found the course could be helpful, they though it would not be definitive in solving their problem
- to extend the course from one semester to one year; this was desirable but unfeasible

- to implement a Maths' classroom

Maths' degree coordinator of UAB visited Virginia Tech University (VTU) which had similar problems in the past. Nowadays, VTU has a computer classroom with 350 processors, opens 7 days a week, 24 hours a day, counts with daily assistance of teacher' assistants (TAs) during 14 hours a day and students can resolve doubts during 5-6 hours per day with the subject teacher. On-line material is prepared to promote independent learning. This material is friendly and easy to use, it covers all maths courses of scientific and technical students and it has an extensive problem data base of all subjects.

UAB decided to carried out the same project as the American University. It consists of a real and virtual support system in a computers classroom providing the students with self-learning material, support from teachers and the possibility to study and work at an individual pace. The students have the chance to hand in some tests and exercises, so that they can be counted in the final assessment.

Results of such experience are still under assessment. However, teachers feel an increase of students' motivation and interest towards Maths, and this hopefully will turn into better achievement and student retention in the degree.

Some final thoughts:
In our context, there are some urgent needs to overcome:
- more flexibility is needed to allow divers students progress though the studies at their own path,
- an increase of support (support or guidance coordinators) at every centre or faculty is required to improve guidance and retention, specially during the first academic year,
- better ICT infrastructure and teachers support will contribute to improve curriculum and adapt it to students' needs, and
- teachers' methodological and conceptual change is necessary to engage students in reflection in order to achieve higher order skills and educational success,

Although we envision similar factors influencing retention, each degree has its own history of abandonments and must be dealt in a specific way. Therefore an initial needs' assessment is necessary to undertake pedagogical and institutional strategies to specific contexts to increase retention.

Finally, universities need to undertake global projects to improve not only transition and guarantee enrolment but to maintain these students until they graduate with remarkable competences. Educational policies should

consider retention guidelines and quality measures for students' success.

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12. Student perceptions of the factors important in retention

Nic Hollinworth, Raymond Flood: University of Oxford

Summary
Students attending a two year course in computing were targeted for a questionnaire aimed at learning more about the reasons that might cause other students on the course to withdraw. The rationale here is that we would obtain a mixed collection of responses both from students who considered withdrawing but didn't, and from students who did not consider withdrawing at all.

The questionnaire was devised to collect responses from current students on why they believed other students might drop out from the course. The results of the questionnaire were used to help devise a strategy to improve retention in future cohorts.

Keywords
Attrition / retention / computing / distance learning / student motivation

Introduction
This paper reports on a research study aimed at gaining a better understanding of why some of the students enrolled on a two year distance learning course in computing, at the Department for Continuing Education at Oxford University, were disengaging from study early in the course and withdrawing. It appeared to us that a significant number of students did not even begin their course of study, and so due to this phenomenon of growing attrition, we wished to identify what could be done to improve the student experience and help to improve the number of students progressing to the second year of the course.

Students withdrawing from the course have in the past often provided us with at least some indication of why they could not continue, and brief details of the reasons were handled by the course manager and retained for future reference. However, the validity of the feedback has always been in question since students withdrawing from a course are perhaps unlikely to cite the real reasons for their discontinuing, instead providing a post hoc rationalization (Simpson, 2003).

Our response to the problem was to obtain data via a questionnaire, devised to collect responses on why the current students believed that other students might drop out from the course. We asked students if they had ever considered dropping out from the course themselves, and if so, to give their own reasons for this. This included such elements as: why they had considered dropping out, at what time during the course they had considered dropping out and what stopped them. We also asked the students for their perceptions on why they believed other students decided to withdraw, and what we might do to help alleviate this problem.

Following a pilot study, initially conducted using students who had previously taken the course, the questionnaire was modified to reflect the feedback gained from the

pilot. It was then handed out to a captive audience at the week-long compulsory summer school for the course. Students were handed the questionnaire form during one of the scheduled lectures, and this was then collected immediately. This meant we attained responses from all students who attended.

The results of the study were then used in helping to devise a strategy to improve the student experience over the next run of the course (2006), and try to reduce attrition whilst retaining the current standards. Better, and more frequent, monitoring of students was implemented, together with a more proactive tutoring initiative and redesign of some of the initial assignments, particularly the very first assignment of the course.

Methodology
The great challenge with collecting data concerning student withdrawal from a course is that many people are reluctant to reveal the true motives for their dropping out, and for a good many reasons too. It seems fairly clear from the data already collected that most students were undertaking the course for personal improvement, and a personal challenge. Failure to achieve their potential or their perceived goals is a great personal failure to many people, so it should not really be surprising that there is a strong reluctance to share this.

A questionnaire was therefore constructed to find out more about the students' reasons for withdrawal, but aimed at the students who had continued with the course, rather than at those who had already left. The main objectives for the study were to find out more about the:
- times during the course when students leave, or are most likely to leave
- reasons given by students for leaving the course
- significance of the given reasons for leaving
- significance of the given reasons for continuing

Questions for the questionnaire were formulated from responses to a preliminary exercise with a very similar class-based course, and through a pilot questionnaire emailed to one of the previous cohorts of students on this course. Only the students within this cohort who successfully completed the course in the previous year responded.

Hence, the data collection exercise was not aimed at the students who had already decided to withdraw (or who had actually withdrawn), but at those who remained on the course and were still actively engaged at the point when the (compulsory) summer school was held. Amongst these remaining students it was likely (from past experience) that at least some had considered withdrawing at some point during the course.

Data was collected from students using a questionnaire, and this was chosen as opposed to other methods as we had intended to collect data from all students, from both year 1 and year 2, who attended the summer school. As there are in excess of 60 students in each year, and only limited time during the summer school with which to collect data, a questionnaire seemed the most effective method of data collection, and could be handed out (and collected) during one of the scheduled lectures. This also ensured a 100% response rate from a captive audience.

We were essentially collecting data for two different categories of student with the same questionnaire: those students who had considered dropping out but did not, and those who had never considered dropping out. The questionnaire therefore had to be designed with a branching structure which catered for these two categories: the former students had an additional set of questions to answer relating to their reasons for considering withdrawal.

The results from the questionnaire were a combination of short, multiple-choice type questions, and longer detailed answers. Data from the former was entered into a spreadsheet for analysis, and the results provided us with a great deal of useful information about the students' perceptions of the course, their expectations and their experience of being a student.

The responses could be broadly categorized into five areas:
- motivations and expectations for taking the course;
- reasons for considering dropping out
- reasons for continuing
- reasons for other students dropping out
- changes that could be implemented to help reduce attrition

The results, collected from both year 1 and year 2 students, were used to help improve tutor development schemes and to construct timely retention strategies. The strategies are of two kinds: those implemented by the tutors (e.g. early contact and better monitoring) and those implemented centrally (e.g. redesign of first two assignments). Both are used to help improve the student experience over the next run of the course - starting in January 2006 - and try to reduce attrition.

Summary of Results from Questionnaire
Motivations for taking the course

One of the possible reasons for a student withdrawing early from a course is that the course did not meet the expectations of the student. This is not to imply that there is anything wrong with the course itself, but individuals that register for the course are very likely to have different ideas of how they perceive the course in terms of delivery, the level of difficulty and breadth and depth of topics.

Although there are no formal pre-requisites for the course, other than a real interest in computers, it is possible that the level of skills required to undertake assignments (structuring essays and reports, analysing articles or extracts from a book or WWW resource) was insufficient, or that the description of the course did not fully convey the course content or amount of commitment required. This first question therefore aimed to try and determine the degree to which we were succeeding in fulfilling expectations of the course, at least as far as we were able.

By classifying the motivations using types of orientation from Taylor's study of student orientations (Gibbs, Beaty, Morgan, 1997), it was found that over both years of the course, the initial motivations for enrolling were a complex mixture of personal, vocational and academic factors, with perhaps a little more emphasis on personal and academic factors. No correlation could be found between the students who considered dropping out and any specific student orientation.

Jeppson (Jeppson et al, 2001) provided 'exit questionnaires' to students who withdrew from specific courses, and found that many of the cited reasons for withdrawal were due to a lack of pre-requisite knowledge, and a course programme that did not meet their initial expectations. Witting (Witting, 2002) also found that students who do not appreciate the *level of content* (difficulty) may lose motivation, and consequently lead to withdrawal. Hence, providing an accurate description of the pre-requisites for a course, perhaps with a sample of the course content, may help students to better gauge whether their existing knowledge and experience meets the basic requirements needed to undertake the course.

Of least importance to students in terms of motivation is

	Year 1	% Year 1	Year 2	% Year 2
Extending and broadening knowledge	36	63%	44	72%
Because it is offered online	31	54%	41	67%
Gaining a qualification	30	53%	41	67%
Gaining an award from Oxford	28	49%	38	62%
Improving career prospects	28	49%	28	46%
General interest in the subject	27	47%	30	49%
Academic stimulation	25	44%	24	39%
Acquiring specific skills	20	35%	22	36%
Needing a new challenge	13	23%	21	34%
Changing career	8	14%	10	16%
Encouraged by employer	3	5%	7	11%
Encouraged by family	3	5%	5	8%

Table 1: What initially motivated you to undertake this course?

Reason	Year 1	% Year 1	Year 2	% Year 2
Not enough time to devote to assignments	13	23%	9	15%
Not sufficient time to keep up with the course material	12	21%	9	15%
Overwhelmed by the amount of information to assimilate	6	11%	1	2%
After initial few weeks, new information increasingly difficult to assimilate	2	4%	2	3%
My expectations of the course were not being fulfilled	2	4%	2	3%
A new job or promotion	1	2%	6	10%
Moving to a new location	0	0%	4	7%
The reasons for undertaking the course were not being fulfilled	0	0%	1	2%

Table 2: Why did you think of dropping out (what were the reason(s))?

encouragement by family or employer. The lack of encouragement by employers would benefit from some further research, particularly from the marketing point of view.

Students who considered withdrawing
Over both years of the course, 39% of students said that they had considered dropping out from the course at some point, and the principal reasons given were insufficient time for study and insufficient time to spend on writing assignments (this accounts for about one third of yr 2 responses and about two fifths of all yr 1 responses). In year 1, the third most frequent reason given was that students were overwhelmed by the amount of information to assimilate. Many students who successfully progress to year two will have developed these skills over the course of the year, which might account for the small number who cited this reason in year 2. Second year students said that external events, such as new job or promotion were the third most frequent reason.

Only a very small percentage of students cited that their expectations of the course or reasons for taking the course, were not being fulfilled, which suggests that overall the content and structure of the course does not require any significant modification, and that the

marketing material is accurate. This does not account for study or time management skills, however, and it is important not to assume that these are the sole responsibility of the student.

We identified the key times when students said they had considered withdrawing from the course, and these turned out to be:
1. Around units 3 and 4 (module 1)
2. Around units 5 and 6 (module 2)
These are significantly different times during the course, since units 3 and 4 are before the summer school in year 1, and units 5 and 6 are at the end of module 1 (just after the summer school), and before the start of module 2.

The possible reasons for these specific times might be:
1. Unit 4 is prior to the summer school exam, and students would need to spend some time revising for this. Many are quite apprehensive about taking exams.
2. Unit 4 content is focused on the execution of machine instructions, and involves mathematical notation and manipulation. This can be quite challenging for some students.
3. Units 5 and 6 are the programming units which students tend to find the most difficult out of all the units. Many students have never written a program

prior to this, and find the concept of programming very difficult.

4. A poor performance during the exam has resulted in a feeling of being unable to fulfil their personal goals and expectations. This would be somewhat augmented if coupled with only a moderate performance on assignments.

5. The student has been struggling from the beginning of the course, but was at least determined to complete the first year before withdrawing.

Half of the students said they considered dropping out more than once, and the majority of these were for the same reasons. Of the students who considered dropping out, most indicated that this was during year 1, either related to the exam, or the through difficulty with the programming units.

Reasons for continuing (students who had considered dropping out)
For those students who had considered dropping out, we wished to learn more about the factors that brought this about, and what kept them going on the course. It can be seen from table 3 below that the majority of responses are *personal* reasons, in terms of satisfaction and achievement, and also the investment of time and money. It is interesting that there are so few responses with respect to support from family/friends or tutors. This raises the questions 'how much support is needed' and 'will students succeed regardless of the quality of support?'. I think the answer to the latter question is almost certainly 'yes', since tutor support appeared to rank quite low in student opinion, yet the large majority of students were still successful.

It is clear that in both years of the course the two main reasons that kept students going were 'satisfaction of completing the course' and 'a personal sense of achievement'. In year 1 this is also closely followed by 'I never quit once I have started something' and 'I enjoy learning'. This suggests that the students are motivated and believe that they have invested significant time and effort into their study. However, the motivation does not appear to be connected with support from the tutor, other tutor-group members or through the reading materials. This is obviously an area for further investigation, particularly with respect to academic and social integration.

Reasons for continuing (all students)
All students were asked to give reasons relating to what kept them from withdrawing from the course, and the results are shown in table 4.

The top 3 reasons for staying on the course are 'I do not easily give up', 'sense of achievement' and 'obtaining a qualification'. These could be classified as intrinsic

Reasons	Year 1	% Year 1	Year 2	% Year 2
The satisfaction of completing the course	12	21%	18	30%
A personal sense of achievement	12	21%	14	23%
I never quit once I have started something	10	18%	7	11%
I enjoy learning	9	16%	7	11%
Doing well in assignments motivated me.	8	14%	9	15%
I had already invested a significant amount of time in the course	7	12%	17	28%
Support from my family and/or friends	6	11%	12	20%
I had paid for the course, so would not quit	6	11%	8	13%
I need to improve skills for career	4	7%	6	10%
Help from my tutor	3	5%	3	5%
Good course notes/reading materials	3	5%	1	2%
Help or support from other tutor group members	0	0%	4	7%

Table 3: What kept you going (students who considered withdrawing)?

factors, as they are essentially personal motivations, as opposed to extrinsic factors such as encouragement from tutors and 'outside' sources, and is a similar to the results from table 3[1]. Help or support from tutor and from family and friends were the least significant factors in year 1, and the same is true for tutorial support in year 2, although there is a more even spread of factors during year 2.

It is possible that year 2 students will be offered more support from family and friends, since by this time they are used to the study schedule, and also will be keen to complete the course having come so far, and not have to resit assignments or exams!

Factors considered as being demotivational
All students, across both years, were asked to give factors that they considered as being demotivational, both from the list provided, and through longer (written) answers if they wished to do so. The fact that such a small proportion of the students answered this question is quite encouraging.

Reasons	Year 1	% Year 1	Year 2	% Year 2
I do not easily give up	30	53%	35	57%
Sense of achievement	29	51%	41	67%
Obtaining a qualification	29	51%	30	49%
Self development	27	47%	30	49%
Incentive to do well	24	42%	26	43%
I enjoy learning	20	35%	26	43%
Good assignment marks	19	33%	25	41%
Good course notes	14	25%	12	20%
Making use of new knowledge gained	13	23%	22	36%
Financial investment	6	11%	13	21%
Help or support from my tutor	5	9%	7	11%
Help or support from family or friends	4	7%	15	25%

Table 4: What kept you going (all students)?

Although there is only a small difference in numbers between the responses, the reasons seem to be split between the two years. In year 1, the main reason given was not being able to keep up with the course materials. This seems to be a general concern amongst students throughout the two years, but particularly during year 1 as evidenced in table 2 above.

All students on the course have access to a forum called 'WebBoard'. The intention of the WebBoard is to encourage student integration by providing an online community of like-minded students with which to share the experience, and also an asynchronous method of receiving feedback from the tutor for questions integrated into the course materials, and general questions that students might have.

In some cases, students indicated that this can be a demotivational factor, with the feeling that their contributions were not valuable. On occasions, not all the discussions or activities worked as they should have. There seems to be a fine balance between group interaction which can be motivational[2], and discussions that are taken too far and so exclude many students who struggle to keep up with what is being discussed. Despite tutor monitoring and intervention, it is not always straightforward to step in here and make a cut off point.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, silence on the WebBoard forum can make students feel isolated, particularly during the first few units in year 1, when individuals may not yet feel integrated as part of the group. There are many tactics that can be used here by tutors, and one effective measure is constant, but gentle, 'nagging' to reassure students that they still have a tutor who is there when they need them, and also (and perhaps more importantly) that other students are still around on the course and that they are not on their own. However, some students are simply not as sociable as others, and prefer to remain (mostly) in the background. This is fine if they are confident with the course and do not need a great deal of outside support, but a risk factor in other cases. In the latter case there is little that can be

Reasons	Year 1	% Year 1	Year 2	% Year 2
Not being able to keep up with the course materials	8	14%	6	10%
High flyers' on the WebBoard make me feel stupid	7	12%	7	11%
Poor assignment marks	5	9%	4	7%
Unable to do myself justice	5	9%	3	5%
Insufficient tutor feedback on the WebBoard	4	7%	11	18%
Insufficient tutor feedback on assignment questions	4	7%	10	16%
Not enough interaction with other students	3	5%	8	13%
Competitiveness of other tutor group members	0	0%	1	2%

Table 5: What factors do you consider as demotivational?

done for students who do not actively seek help when it is needed.

Students in year 2 were mostly concerned with the amount and quality of feedback received through the WebBoard forum, and on marked assignments. These are issues which have been constantly reviewed, and are the subject of much debate during staff development days. A series of guidelines have been produced for tutors to follow.

Why do other students drop out?
We asked all students why they thought other students taking the course might wish to withdraw. Originally, we contacted students who had withdrawn from the course through email, and asked them to complete a similar questionnaire. One of the questions was aimed at determining the reasons why the student had withdrawn from the course. However, the responses were so few

that the data was of little use.

Instead, the question was posed to current students on the course, asking them to give us reasons why they thought others might consider withdrawing from the course. This might seem an odd question to put to students, but in the absence of responses from students who have actually withdrawn, they are probably better geared to answering this than anyone.

The two most frequently given reasons over both years were factors such as family commitments, illness and work commitments, followed closely by a lack of time for studying and working. The first factor here can be considered as external to the course, and there seems little that can be done to help alleviate the problems here. However, there is the possibility of providing advice for family and friends of students on the course website, aimed at helping those in the supporting role to understand what it is like to be a students, and the demands it places on you.

The second most frequent reason given was a lack of time for both studying and working. This is a common problem for anyone studying part-time, but can be alleviated to some extent by better organisation of time, and some initial planning. Workload has often been cited as a problem, either because of the pressure from working full-time, or the lack of available time for study and completing assignments satisfactorily.

A significant number of students stated that they did have difficulties organising time for studying, although no additional data was provided. Despite this, it is interesting to note that the length of the course and number of assignments were the least significant factors cited!

Student suggestions for reducing attrition
The final question that we asked students was concerned with suggestions that might help to improve the student experience, and try to encourage students to continue with the course, rather than drop out. As the students who took part in the questionnaire all have first-hand experience of the course as students themselves, this is a reasonable method of collecting direct feedback.

We gave the students a number of options (based upon responses from the pilot), plus additional space on the form to write in longer responses. In order of popularity, using table 7 below, the most frequent responses were:

1. Provide real-time chat for specific topics
2. Show value of diploma and how it compares to others
3. Make personal contact by telephone
4. Spend more time at beginning bonding as a group
5. Show relevance of course to careers

Reasons	Year 1	% Year 1	Year 2	% Year 2
Family commitments, illness or other external factors	37	65%	39	64%
Not enough time for studying and working	34	60%	37	61%
Feeling that they are out of their depth – the subject matter is too difficult	33	58%	24	39%
Unaware of the commitment that is necessary for the course	28	49%	27	44%
Difficulties in organising time for studying	24	42%	27	44%
Poor marks for coursework are demotivational	15	26%	22	36%
Not used to writing assignments – not enough preparation	14	25%	16	26%
Financial problems	13	23%	18	30%
Poor assignment marks	12	21%	10	16%
Insufficient skills for effective studying	11	19%	18	30%
Don't know how to make the most of the available support	11	19%	14	23%
They don't realise that there is support available	7	12%	10	16%
Unable to do themselves justice	6	11%	6	10%
Not enough support and/or feedback from the tutor	5	9%	17	28%
Not really getting to know anyone in the tutor group before starting	5	9%	8	13%
Not enough incentive to continue	5	9%	8	13%
Too many assignments	4	7%	5	8%
The course is too long	1	2%	7	11%

Table 6: What do you think are the main reasons why other people drop out or consider dropping out?

The course does currently provide a real-time chat facility integrated into the course forum (WebBoard), but it seemed clear that we were perhaps not using this appropriately. Chat sessions are undertaken in tutor groups, and organised either by the tutor of a group, or members of that group. How the chat session is used (educationally or otherwise) is entirely up to the group, and currently there are no topics of discussion integrated as part of the learning materials.

Burnett (Burnett, 2003) found that online chat sessions helped to encourage social integration in groups of individuals, helped to create positive group dynamics, and allowed students to share both social and academic experiences. Hence, scheduling one or more chat sessions at the start of the course might help to reduce the feeling of isolation that students of distance learning courses encounter, and provide a vehicle for students to get to know other tutor group members prior to the summer school.

The value of the diploma course, and the relevance to careers could be considered to be a marketing issue, although 'value' is a qualitative term and is likely to be interpreted differently by different individuals. Two students commented that they would like to have been provided with details on potential pathways following completion of the course, and what possibilities exist for them for further study.

Reasons	Year 1	% Year 1	Year 2	% Year 2
Provide scheduled real-time chat sessions for specific topics in the course	31	54%	35	57%
Show the value of the diploma – how it compares to other qualifications	27	47%	30	49%
Make personal contact by telephone to students who are struggling	25	44%	26	43%
Spend more time at the beginning bonding as a group	20	35%	24	39%
Show the relevance that the course has to careers	18	32%	24	39%
Get to know the other tutor group members better (prior to the SS)	13	23%	18	30%
Offer a more flexible course structure	11	19%	10	16%
Cut down on the number of assignments	6	11%	8	13%
Provide more challenges	5	9%	3	5%

Table 7: What might we do to encourage students to continue and not drop out?

Our response to the problem

In response to the feedback that we obtained from students through this study, we looked at four key aspects of the course which, with some revision, could help to improve retention. This initial response had to take into consideration the time-frame available, as major changes to the structure of the course or tutoring were not possible at short notice.

Revised initial assignments and student induction
Many of the students on the course had either returned to studying after a break of many years, or had little formal experience of study at further or higher education (though perhaps some GCSEs or equivalent, and some experience of using a computer). Hence, many students were not equipped with the necessary skills required to organise time for study, and complete the longer, essay-type questions that were set. Essay type assignments can be difficult for many students, who find the whole process of structuring an argument quite daunting.

Hence, the first assignment was revised with this in mind, and split into two parts:
Part 1 (worth 10%) is submitted first and is focussed on the structure of a written assignment, including formatting a document, creating footnotes and correct referencing. The aim was to focus on essay style and structure only, rather than on content, giving generous marks (for motivation), and detailed feedback.

Part 2 (worth 90%) is submitted at the end of the first unit (unit 1) and contains questions about the unit itself, some of which are essay-type questions.

The desire was to get students involved with the course quickly, but without giving them false impressions of the workload required, or the standard of work accepted. Hence, first assignment was designed to ease students into the course and to help build confidence in their abilities, and in writing an assignment. It is a difficult to achieve the correct balance, since, if the initial assignment is too difficult, students may be put off trying; if it is too simple, they may consider the course to be less valuable.

Improved monitoring
The course materials and forum are being considered for a move to a new system (Moodle) which potentially allows for better, and more detailed, monitoring. In the early stages of the course, it is crucial that we know whether students are accessing the materials, and are participating (however little) in the forums. Tutors can then act on this information and chase up students who are 'absent'. In the current course environment it is not possible to track the students, other than manually emailing them.

We are still trying to encourage social integration through a number of embedded exercises within the early units of the course (and also many of the later units through group activities), with the emphasis on getting students to communicate through the forum. Whilst this has met with some success, it does not seem to be a useful indicator with respect to attrition. We did not find any correlation between use of the forum and the propensity to withdraw. This is similar to the findings at Robert

Gordon's University by Edwards and Middleton (Edwards and Middleton, 2001).

Staff Development
The findings from the study were presented to existing and new tutors at the staff development day, prior to the start of the next run of the course. This provoked many positive responses and suggestions for helping in reducing student loss. In particular we decided upon the following courses of action:

1. Each tutor would email all students in the tutor group with a personal welcome. (This is in addition to the letters all student receive by post from the course team)
2. Tutors would monitor their tutors groups very closely for the first 3 weeks, providing a summary at the end of the period of student activity. Students who were 'absent' were emailed asking them if there were any problems. (It occasionally happens that students cannot log in, and do not know who to contact about this)
3. All tutor group postings on the forum must be responded to within 48 hours at the latest. Students need to know that tutors are active.
4. At the end of the 3 week period, the first part of assignment 1 is due, and any non submissions would be investigated.

Conclusions
The questionnaire provided a useful set of results regarding the course structure, delivery, tutor support, methods of communication, social integration, assessment and academic content. From the responses to the questionnaire we were in a better position to decide on how best to provide support for future cohorts, and have gained some significant insights into student motivations, strengths and weaknesses, and aspects of the course delivery that student consider as important when taking distance learning programmes such as this one.

During the current run of the course, we have been able to account for every student on the course, and have details of the status of each. In other words, we know who is doing what, and when. This is not always easy to track, but with more active involvement from the course team and tutors this has been possible.

The provision and/or support of adequate study skills still needs investigating since students in year 1 stated that they found there was a lot of new information to assimilate, and year 1 and 2 found that there was insufficient time for study and assignments. We can help with the first of these through feedback from tutors, but study skills and time managements skills require more work.

Jones (Jones et al, 2004) suggests that students with no recent experience of HE need exposure to study support and induction programmes in order for them to be able to cope with the organisational demands of a course. This is quite a challenge for distance learning courses, and is an area which requires more consideration for future runs of the course.

Currently, we can offer tutor support and feedback on student participation and assignment work, but perhaps there is an additional social element that could also be addressed to help students integrate themselves with the course earlier on, and feel more like 'insiders' and less like 'outsiders' (Wegerif, 1998).

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Footnotes:
1. We posed the questions slightly differently in both cases to see if the wording of the question influenced the response. There was no significant difference in the numbers.
2. This is especially evident after the summer school.

13. The Enhance Project: supporting academic practice development in the first year of learning in higher education

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Summary
A growing recognition of the need to nurture academic practice skills in the first year of learning prompted a team of experienced university teachers to design, implement and evaluate an innovative approach to induction. To enable first year students to acclimatise to the higher education environment, a series of interactive seminars and workshops piloted in 2006 with two groups of students undertaking health related programmes of study. The results of the pilot evaluation are encouraging. The Enhance Project is set to roll out to 620 first year students in September 2006. This paper firstly provides background to the student experience in the first year of higher education, giving a Scottish perspective. Secondly, it presents the findings of an evaluation of a Scottish academic practice development project, piloted over a year with two groups of first year students.

Keywords
first year experience / student centred / academic practice development / innovation / higher education / induction and transition

Introduction
The importance of the impact of the first year at university on future performance of undergraduate students is internationally recognised (McInnis 2001). The academic community generally, acknowledge that the first year of higher education provides the building blocks for future academic and personal achievement.

> 'The formative experiences of students are
> pivotal in establishing attitudes, outlooks
> and approaches to learning that will endure
> beyond the undergraduate years'.
> (McInnis and James 1995: ix)

Pitkethly and Prosser (2001), in their study investigating the causes of attrition in the first year of university, believe that initial experiences at university influence both progression and attrition rates. Additionally, research indicates, that first year and subsequent transition periods between years 'are critical in promoting effective learning habits' (Perry and Allard 2002:1). High attrition rates in the first year of tertiary education have financial, academic and social implications for both the individual and the institution (Perry and Allard 2003).

The First Year Experience
First impressions strongly influence student adaptation and students mainly gain their first impressions through the induction process. Edward (2003) discusses the need to take account of the complex needs of the beginning student population when planning an induction programme. He argues that induction must 'inform, involve and orientate the entrants and dispel the impersonal image' (Edward 2003:227). Edward (2003) advocates an Activity Based Introduction (ABI) to introduce the student to the department and the institution. This approach places the student at the centre of activity and promotes engagement with the

institution from the start of their educational journey.

A *one-size fits all* approach to induction does not always work. Pitkethly and Prosser (2001) maintain that, as each institution is different, individual universities must undertake rigorous investigation to uncover the needs of their own students. In addition, first year students will also vary within an institution in relation to the characteristics of Schools and Faculties.

The literature suggests that failure to acclimatise to the environment is the main reason that students leave or are removed from university (Tinto 1995). Tinto's (1993) model and research findings provide evidence in relation to student withdrawal and transition, although Edward (2003) observes that since Tinto identified the transitional induction process as a 'key factor in the students' departure process' little research has been undertaken to further quantify this finding (Edward 2003:227).

In Scotland, there is a strong tradition of vocational education within the post-1992 universities. In reality, this means that there is a diverse student population on campus with common requirements and specialised, discipline related needs (QAA 2005a). The work of McInnis and James (1995) and McInnis et al (2000) underpin the current enhancement theme, 'First Year Experience: Student Engagement and Empowerment' (QAA 2005a). The theme highlights key issues in first year, including integration, preparation, perception and personal characteristics.

The quality of the academic and cultural support provided throughout the first year of university has implications for academic development throughout an undergraduate programme and beyond (McInnis and James 1995). For students to mature intellectually, they have to embrace the 'whole university experience'.

Reasons given by students for feeling less than prepared include, 'lack of information' and 'insufficient or inadequate preparatory events' (CHERI 2004:2). Support for learning has to meet the needs of first year students and importantly, take into account the related staff development issues (CHERI 2004).

The QAA Scotland (2005b:1) suggest that 'some [Scottish] institutions have concerns that for some students the first HE year is now unsatisfactory'. If students fail to engage with all aspects of first year, they will not become 'autonomous and independently motivated learners' in the latter stages of their education. Induction should provide generic information for all and take account of the needs of sub-groups, such as, school leavers, international and mature students (QAA 2005b:1).

The CHERI (2004) report identified three key phases within first year: pre-entry, on-course and transition. Providing the right information at the right time is crucial to the success of an on-course induction programme. Durkin and Main (2002) suggest that a discipline related element to induction is vital at all stages, to introduce the student to the expectations of the department and the institution. The Enhance Project focuses on induction into the first year of pre-registration health and nursing programmes. The project is a local initiative; designed to enhance the student experience through a programme of focussed, activity-based learning.

Background to the Project

Academic Staff within the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Community Health, provide (un-quantified) academic support for all first year students on an individual basis. No formal induction programme exists beyond one week prior to the commencement of all university undergraduate programmes. For a year before implementation of the project pilot, academic staff discussed issues relating to the level, type and amount of academic/cultural preparation required for first year students at induction and transition.

Reflecting the current QAA Scotland (2005a) enhancement theme, focussing on the first year experience, the school learning and teaching team in partnership with the Effective Learning Service identified the need to develop academic practice development skills in the first year of learning. The result of this collaboration emerged as an enhanced induction programme.
The Enhance Project promotes and supports induction in health related, courses of study, through a programme of student centred activities, underpinned by a validated Effective Learning Module.

Methodology

Educational evaluation is the 'systematic appraisal' of teaching and learning, using research tools to quantify and interpret findings. The results of research are deemed to be more 'generalisable and more varied than the interpretation of the results of evaluation' (Wilkes and Bligh 1999:1271).

The pilot enhance programme, implemented in 2005, provided information and support for first year health students in a structured and time managed way. The emphasis was on individual and group exploration, investigation, scholarship skills and effective learning. The project team evaluated the effectiveness of the programme from a student perspective to ascertain if it was fit for purpose. Staff with experience of first year teaching also participated. The findings were generalised to the needs of all first year health and nursing students within the School.

Figure 1 demonstrates the activity within the stages of planning, implementation and evaluation and links the four stages of the action cycle to the broad project outcomes.

The pilot project, although not designed to be action research study, utilised an action cycle. This model is appropriate as it encourages individuals to use action theory to challenge, change and enhance established practice (Tolson et al 2005). The team adapted the model to allow them to challenge, intervene and change the process of induction (Waterman et al 2001). The resulting pilot project ran from 2005-2006, underpinned by the outcomes established at the outset (Figure 1). The programme was delivered to one group as a short, intense module and to the other as a series of sessions spanning an academic year. The decision to utilise different methods of delivery was not research based. The pre-registration curriculum dictated induction delivery from the outset. This anomaly was factored into the project evaluation.

The Use of Focus Groups

Three focus groups with both staff (2) and students (1) generated information on the effectiveness of the project and investigated the needs of first year students. Focus groups have been used as a tool to collect qualitative data for over 20 years and their advantage is described as 'the dynamic nature of the interaction achieved with little input from the facilitator' (Millar et al 1996:195). Focus groups rely on good planning and facilitation (Lane et al (2001). The contents of each focus group was discussed among the team and agreed in advance. The research advisor to the project worked with the facilitator to ensure the questions were both valid and appropriate. The facilitator was a teacher with previous experience of group work in both clinical and educational

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Action Cycle	Activities	Related Project Outcomes
2004 Pre-Planning	◆ Principles of Effective Learning Module (SHE Level 1: SCQF 7) implemented.	1. Front load student support in this transformational year of learning in higher education is to promote independent reflective learners and to reduce the volume of support currently provided in subsequent years.
2005 Planning	◆ QAA Scotland identify the First Year Experience as an enhancement theme ◆ School based discussions regarding the need for an enhanced induction programme ◆ School Learning and Teaching Team work with Effective Learning Service and undergraduate Programme Organisers/Module Leaders to formulate the student centered induction (Enhance Project)	2. Forge more explicit links between the School and the university Effective Learning Service
2005-2006 Action/Intervention	Enhance Programme delivered to 2 groups of first year students: ◆ Group 1: (40) Enhance delivered over a period of 2 weeks (2 lecturers) ◆ Group 2: (25) Enhance delivered throughout the academic year (2 lecturers) Summary of content ◆ Acclimatising to an academic environment ◆ Developing group skills ◆ Exploring factors that affect ability to study ◆ Learning to manage time effectively ◆ Beginning to source, search and review relevant evidence ◆ Developing wider scholarship skills in health related programmes ◆ Using reflection as a tool for personal and professional development in health related subjects	3. Pilot an enhanced induction programme beyond core delivery 4. Lay the foundations for future personal and professional development in year one 5. Promote equity of opportunity and realisation of individual potential in staff-student interactions in relation to student support
2006 Evaluation	◆ Student Focus Group (1) ◆ Academic Staff Focus Group (2) ◆ Collation and Data Analysis ◆ Critical Dialogue/Academic Presentations and Publications	6. Collect, collate and analyse data. 7. Disseminate findings (Adapted from Waterman et al 2001)
Figure 1: Structure of the Enhance Project (Pilot)		

settings.

The quality and type of interaction differentiates focus groups from other research interviews. Morgan (1996:139) suggests the 'researcher's legitimate questioning stance' throughout the focus group interview is ideal when seeking a breadth of opinion. As the team had to implement an evaluation strategy in a very short space of time and within a limited budget, focus groups presented as an ideal vehicle as they are time, resource and financially effective (Gray-Vickery 1993)

The optimum number of participants depends on the purpose of the focus group. Smaller groups are more appropriate for topics that generate heated debate and discussion. Larger groups can be advantageous in subjects that may involve lower levels of participation or a narrow range of views. Small groups also allow for greater moderator involvement and discussion management (Morgan 1996).

Volunteers were sought from both students and staff and attendance ranged from 5-10 per group. Recruitment and retention of focus group participants is an issue. Depending on the population targeted, problems range from a paucity of volunteers to poor retention of members (McLafferty 2004). The focus groups, although not dependant on retention, did require an adequate number of volunteers to turn up on the day.

Ethical considerations
All participants were provided with written material explaining the purpose of the focus group interviews. In order to maximise the accuracy of the data record, and with the full consent of participants, an audio tape recording was made of each session. Data was transcribed in an anonymous fashion and accessed only by the project team.

Findings
Student Observations
Focus group responses were analysed in relation to the specific questions asked by the facilitator. The questions mainly covered responses to the strands of learning within induction and asked the students to comment on their perception of the effectiveness of the project. The themes of belonging and knowing as well as a need to develop key academic skills recurred throughout. Overall, the findings are encouraging. The students appeared to enjoy the programme and to have found the content (Figure 1) both relevant and appropriate. The students made the following observations in relation to the enhance programme and sessions:

> 'It made us aware of what the university expected of us right from the beginning; because of this it reduced to some degree our fear of the unknown' (Student: March 2006)

> 'Yes they were useful – pretty soon we realised that what we were being taught were skills that we would need during our time at university. It was nice to have the information' (Student: March 2006)

> 'I've never been in higher education before but I didn't struggle with the study skills everything that was being taught was very practical' (Student: March 2006)

The students reported that the project had helped them to work in groups, to build self-confidence and acclimatise to life at university. These factors appeared to apply to all students, even those who were already graduates.

Knowing what was expected and being able to cope was important to all the students:

> 'Because I had already been in higher education I knew right away that these were essential skills' (Student: March 2006)

> ''Fear of asking questions or asking for help diminished quickly as a result of group work and support from tutors' (Student: March 2006)

> '[The project] helped you to know what was expected of you at university and in the school' (Student: March 2006)

> 'This course is essential for everyone' (Student: March 2006)

There were some problems identified. Getting the balance correct is something that the team have been working on as the result of feedback. The students emphasised the importance of information and more importantly, time to practice these new skills. Reflection was something that they all felt required more time and facilitator input:

> 'More emphasis on reflection – it is really difficult to get used to writing in the first person' (Student: March 2006)

> 'We all found this [reflection] quite difficult to master. We think more emphasis needs to be put on this topic' (Student: March 2006)

Academic Staff Focus Groups
Academic staff who worked with first year students were asked by the focus group facilitator to discuss their perceptions of the needs of novice students. Some of the staff who participated in the focus groups had been involved in the pilot project but not all. All participants, students and staff, believed that first year students required a portfolio of academic practice skills to

underpin their programme of studies and beyond. Focus group participants highlighted advantages and disadvantages associated with short and extended approaches to induction. Figure 2 summarises the main findings of both staff focus groups.

Four main themes emerged through first level analysis of the academic staff responses. These centred mainly on first year student abilities, student characteristics, learning challenges and skills for independent learning. The responses were, to a certain extent, predicted and accurately reflected much of the anecdotal evidence previously encountered by the project team. The report, *Responding to Student Needs*, identified these issues at a national level (QAA Scotland 2005a). The project focus groups corroborated the national findings at a local level.

Both staff and students expressed the need for effective information technology skills. The project will promote e-skills development. An interactive student centred virtual learning environment (VLE) is currently under development. As part of a blended approach to induction, the VLE will underpin mainstreaming of the project into all first year programmes within the School. The effectiveness of this medium is currently unknown, although a robust e-learning strategy is now successfully embodied within many educational programmes throughout the university.

During the evaluation process, it became clear that both staff and students considered higher education culture to be an important factor. Students identified the need to acquire skills to adjust to the first year and staff identified culture shift as a challenge for novice students and academic staff alike. The QAA Scotland (2005a) suggests that there is a mismatch between student and staff expectations, proposing that induction should target potential first year students before, as well as after they enrol.

Conclusion

The Enhance Project is timely, relevant and according to the students, fit for purpose. The project team have designed an innovative induction programme that focuses on more than just academic skill development. Integrating effective academic practice into the curriculum is a greater challenge than the inclusion of a narrow study skills programme. The Enhance Project promotes student engagement at social, cultural and academic levels.

The results of the pilot evaluation have influenced the design of main project. First year students have common and discipline specific needs. The focus group responses informed the design of the main project and prompted the project team to embed specific as well as generic needs of first year health students into the induction

Emerging focus group themes	Summary of responses
First year student abilities	◆ IT skills (younger students) ◆ Talking ◆ Supporting each other ◆ Bringing their own life experiences
Ideal first year student characteristics	◆ Willing to accept support ◆ Recognition of limitations ◆ Motivated ◆ Prepared ◆ Questioning ◆ Willing to listen ◆ Interacts with others ◆ Confident
Identified first year student challenges	◆ Academic writing ◆ Searching ◆ Questioning ◆ Integration into university ◆ Lack of group skills ◆ Time management ◆ Lack of searching skills ◆ Confidence building ◆ Making the links between health theory and clinical practice ◆ Diverse student population
Requirements for independent learning	◆ Investigation skills ◆ Academic reading ◆ Engagement with the student experience ◆ Self awareness ◆ Self confidence ◆ Group skills

Figure 2: Summary of academic staff responses related to emerging focus group themes

curriculum.

The findings that emerged from the pilot are already informing future developments focussing on induction into first year, transition from one level to another and preparation for advanced level study. The project VLE will integrate fully into the project in the longer term.

In 2006, the project will begin to influence the academic practice development of 620 first year students within the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Community Health at Glasgow Caledonian University. The project team have planned an evaluation strategy that combines both questionnaires and focus groups, targeting participating

staff and students. The findings of this evaluation will be the subject of a future publication.

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