Supporting Students: Extended Induction

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The STAR (Student Transition and Retention) Project

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Student Transition and Retention

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Preface

The purpose of this booklet is to describe practices that have worked in some institutions to ease the stresses of students' transition into Higher Education and to help to improve retention. This is important because student retention has become a significant issue both for students and for institutions. Students waste valuable time and resources if they drop out from a university course in which they have invested their hopes and aspirations and institutions waste money and staff effort. Early withdrawal of students frustrates the purposes of all. It is, however, just the measurable component of a more general malaise. For every student who takes the decision to leave a course there must be many more who are *just* able to pass, who are *just* able to cope with the stresses of Higher Education and who are failing to reach their full potential. Equally, there will be students at university who should never have joined or who should have joined a different course. They might be too immature, too deficient in the basic skills required or their talents might lie in different

directions.

Every institution that has highlighted student retention as a significant component of its strategies has investigated the causes of early leaving and most will have drawn similar conclusions. The STAR consortium was formed at a time when the generality of these causes was becoming apparent but the responses to them were less clear. The first action of the consortium was to list a set of outcomes that, if achieved, would contribute to the alleviation of problems associated with student transition. These we published as the *Guidelines for the management of student transition* (Cook *et al.*, 2005). The consortium then identified practices that were likely to assist the achievement of the outcomes in the *Guidelines* booklet and researched them.

The STAR booklets, of which this is one, are small compendiums of practices that have worked in some institutions to ease the stresses of students' transition into Higher Education. Many have been shown to improve retention. Many are the practical expression of institutional policies. All are descriptions of the dedicated work of teaching and support staff in the Higher Education sector who have introduced, maintained or developed practices for the benefit of students. The practices are derived from three sources. First, some were identified through survey. These were researched by STAR staff and written in collaboration with practitioners. Second, some staff volunteered to write about their practices independently. Third, some new practices were introduced and some existing ones evaluated using funding provided by the STAR project. Most practices have been described by staff and then validated by students through questionnaires or focus groups. All the reports contained in these booklets have been refereed independently and then approved by the STAR Steering Group.

This booklet describes the practices in enough detail to allow others to adopt or advocate that practice in their own institutions. The practices, however, should not be considered as definitive. They work in the institutions in which they were implemented by the staff who implemented them and with the students who participated. They are unlikely to remain the same. They will almost certainly evolve further even in the institutions in which they have been described and, when adopted elsewhere, will need to be adapted to suit local conditions. They are, therefore, offered as foundations on which to build appropriate practices to suit the staff, the students and learning environments involved.

REFERENCE

Cook, A., Rushton, B.S., McCormick, S.M. and Southall, D.W. (2005). *Guidelines for the management of student transition*. University of Ulster, Coleraine.

Gaining Independence – Slowly

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I went to University in the 1960s. At that time there were no thoughts of student induction; at least none that were apparent to students. "*That is something you will have to find out for yourself*" was a recurring response to enquiries. Student induction, through problem based learning, worked for most! It gave just enough information just at the right time. It assumed, however, that students were already independent learners and had the coping

strategies to learn by discovery and error. It assumes also that students have time to make mistakes and recover from them and that they are well motivated enough to persist through an initial period of instability.

Times have changed. The spectrum of students entering university is broader and many are now less certain than previous generations that a university is really where they ought to be. As a consequence universities are now finding that they need to manage the transition of a broad variety of students to the behaviour thought desirable for a graduate. With the diversity of backgrounds it is inevitable that even a well-managed process will fail to address the needs of some student groups.

Most students who leave university early do so in the first six to eight weeks. Thus at the University of Ulster in 2003-04 about 60% of the students who left in year one did so before December and the commonest cause given for leaving was related to the suitability of the course. This coordinates well both with the theoretical framework of Tinto (Tinto, 1993) and the findings of Yorke in national surveys (Yorke, 1999).

Tinto (1993) proposed that students left early because of a number of factors related both to the students' prior experience and to institutional characteristics. Where the social or academic experiences of students early in a course fail to integrate them into their new institution then the student commitment to the course or institution decreases and persistence is unlikely. The solutions to this lack of integration lie both prior to entry so that students are better prepared to meet the challenges of the institution they choose to attend and also after entry so that the transition from students' previous practices to those considered desirable is a gradual one. Good practice prior to entry is considered by Macintosh *et al.* (2006) in this series.

Yorke (1999), in an analysis of withdrawn students from a range of UK institutions, demonstrated that the major reasons given for non-continuance were:

Poor quality of the student experience;

Inability to cope with the demands of the programme;

Unhappiness with the social environment;

Wrong choice of programme;

Matters related to financial need; and

Dissatisfaction with aspects of institutional provision.

The experience of students early in their course leaves a significant impression that may influence later decisions. In many institutions, induction is seen as an event introducing the course and the institution. While this is a valuable exercise many students either miss it entirely or barely remember most of it. Thus students interviewed at one institution recalled:

> "*One thing I remember about actual induction was that we met our personal tutors. And we were given a library tour and were told what we would be*

doing and given a bit of introduction that way. That was probably the biggest impression of settling in and getting to know the area."

"*I remember the library tour and that was how you got to meet your tutor group and that is how I got to meet everyone. I think they should make a bigger thing of the library as when you get to second and third year you really need it then.*"

"*And it broke the ice ... and that would be the biggest thing.*"

For some students their first week at university will be the first time they have spent an extended time away from home and the first time they have had to fend for themselves in a strange town. The initial induction is an important component of welcoming these students into the institution and helps them cope with change. It may not be the best time however in which to compress a great volume of critical information. Activities in this first week are critical for the future of some students and are considered by Cook *et al.* (2006).

As has been highlighted by Thomas *et al.* (2005), academic induction should be an extended process with information and activities spread forward through at least the first term to allow students to keep pace with the flow of information and back prior to entry to ensure that students are well prepared. Further, the STAR project team would advocate that induction should start when a student applies to the institution with the aim of attaining a set of goals by the end of year one. These goals should encompass being skilled in all aspects of student life and include at least:

Independent learning (the development of research skills);

The balancing of study, work and a social life;

Assessment techniques including how not to plagiarise;

Verbal and written communication; and

IT skills.

This cannot be accomplished either quickly or easily.

The case studies reported here encompass a range of activities that are designed to support students through the early part of the course. These are activities in addition to curricular interventions that are considered separately (Rushton *et al.,* 2006). Sarah Maguire considers a series of questions asked at school level related to the process of transition and outlines the resulting activities. This study provides a useful checklist of the considerations applicable throughout a course and not just at the beginning. The methods of assessment that are components of pre-entry qualifications mould the new students attitude towards the assessment in Higher Education. Students have little time to adjust to any changes in methods since summative events can occur only a few weeks into the first semester. To ease this type of transition the University of Wolverhampton has instituted the practice of

re-assessment, which supports students who fail examinations in the first semester by permitting re-assessment after a few weeks during which they can benefit from additional tutorial support.

More continuing and immediate support is offered by the Universities of Brighton and Manchester. Dave Harley and colleagues at the University of Brighton describe the use of text messages to maintain communication with students through their mobile phones. A detailed evaluation shows that students use text messages more extensively than other modes of communication and that they benefit from the immediacy of information received in this form. PDP is being introduced nationwide and an extensive evaluation of an electronic version by the University of Manchester shows that it too allows continuing unintrusive support to be offered to students as they migrate from the focused academic and social support available at school and college to the greater independence and freedom expected at university.

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Induction as a Longitudinal Process

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SUMMARY

The School of Environmental Sciences undertook a review of its support for students in

transition. Employing a critical phase model, a series of key questions in each year of the course was identified and activities put in place to address each. The resulting series of interventions represents a holistic attempt at supporting all students through the course.

Keywords: Student transition, induction, longitudinal induction.

STUDENT PROFILE

The intake of first years to the suite of BSc Environmental Science degrees in 2001 was made up mainly of students from Northern Ireland (86%). Two students were recruited from the Republic of Ireland and one from Great Britain. The most common basis of acceptance was A levels accounting for 77.2% of students. The average point score on the Honours programme was 15.5 and 9.2 for the ordinary (non-honours) degree. The ratio of male to female students was approximately 1:1.

Recruitment to environmental science programmes is continuing to decline nationally and this is reflected in the recruitment figures for the University of Ulster. The honours programmes recruited 21 students in 2001-02 compared to 20 in 2000-01 and the degree recruited eight students compared to 11 in 2000-01. However, the course has an increasing number of students entering directly into the second year either due to transfers from other University of Ulster degree courses or from external HND programmes. In 2001-02 four students were recruited in this way.

Final year performance is excellent and compares well with national trends. In 2001 the results were exemplary with seven first class degrees being awarded. The external examiner commended this performance. Overall 18.9% achieved a first class degree, 46% 2:1, 32.4% 2:2 and 2.7% thirds. However, the level of first year non-completion and progression is problematic and the course committee is continually reviewing practice in order to rectify this. This concern has resulted in the school taking a holistic approach to improving performance and retention with induction being a central concern.

INDUCTION AS A PROCESS

The School of Environmental Sciences at the University of Ulster considers induction to be an ongoing process supporting students through periods of transition. This extends from providing appropriate information about each of the courses available and running open days for applicants and parents through to providing advice on careers and employability to students approaching graduation. In order to plan appropriately a critical phase model approach has been adopted where at each stage a series of questions have been posed (Appendix 1). The aim of this approach is to ensure that at each stage students undertake appropriate activities and acquire relevant information and skills to enable them to progress successfully through their degree.

The range of induction activities subsequently agreed upon and used is summarized in

Appendix 2.

The induction activities are carried out by a number of staff with overall responsibility resting with Course Directors. Activities targeted at prospective students are organized by a School Recruitment Group. Due to the diversity of the activities it is difficult to identify and individualize the impact; however, participants have indicated their appreciation at receiving good quality, timely and useful information. In particular, parents have found the open days to be beneficial in understanding the nature of Higher Education and students have commented positively on the Enterprise and Employability module and its usefulness in preparing them for looking for employment.

Extensive evaluation of the induction field course has been undertaken and this is reported in a STAR Case study (McLaughlin *et al.,* 2006).

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APPENDIX 1. Critical phase analysis: the questions

Prior to Higher Education	What information are we giving them (students, parents, teachers)?
	Do they know what they are signing up to?
	What do we know about their prior expectations?
Week one	How do we support social and academic integration through social events?
Year one	How do we identify and support those particularly at risk, e.g. monitoring performance, study skills, remediation of knowledge gaps?
	How do we adapt to a more diverse intake?
	How do we support the development of independent learning skills?
Year two	How do we induct them into the changing requirements/standards of year two?
	How do we induct direct entry students?
	How do we prepare students for going on placement?
	How do we prepare students for honours project assessment?
Year three	How do we induct them into the changing requirements/standards of year three?
	How do we induct the students into the world of work/further training?

APPENDIX 2. Critical phase analysis: the answers

Prior to Higher Education	All publicity materials have been reviewed and sent to prospective students and careers teachers.
	Open day event held for applicants and parents.

Week one	Structured induction with teaching and learning sessions, meetings with advisors of study, subject specific library tours, computer induction and a three-day residential field course.
Year one	Fortnightly tutorials with advisors of study; these have prescribed outcomes and linked pieces of assessment aimed at early formative feedback and diagnosis and support of 'at risk' students. The focus is on study skills, time management, oral and written communication, plagiarism and correct academic referencing. Portfolios have been introduced to develop reflection and planning skills. End of semester two students receive individual advice on second year choices.
Year two	Induction meeting held to discuss changing levels of performance and staff expectations. Tailored induction run for students entering directly into year two. Module on Enterprise and Employability provides careers support and prepares students for placement. Research methods modules prepare students for dissertation work.
Year three	Induction meeting held to discuss changing levels of performance and staff expectations. Careers advice and further information provided.

A Re-assessment Strategy

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SUMMARY

In the 2002-03 academic year the Biosciences Division of the School of Applied Sciences in the University of Wolverhampton re-organized its teaching; it reduced both the number of student contact hours and the number of taught weeks within the semester to allow for both assessment and, if necessary, re-assessment within each module. Formal examinations were only permitted at the end of semesters two, four and six. Assessments in semesters one, three and five were in an alternative format appropriate for the evaluation of the learning outcomes involved.

The reorganization of the assessment and the supporting teaching, together with other changes in practice, have resulted in improved student performance and retention. Additionally both the assessment policy and the associated teaching have received

favourable comments from both staff and students.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, many students have entered university with little appreciation of what university life and work will be like and today, in addition to this, more and more students are entering Higher Education with a range of different educational and social backgrounds. Inevitably some of these students will need more time to adjust and fully engage themselves in the independent learning environment of university. Until this happens they are at a higher risk of not completing their course of study.

Non-completion of university is a complex issue; often there are multiple contributing factors, but certainly if a student performs poorly in their first year they are more likely to withdraw feeling academically inadequate (Tinto, 1988). Studies have confirmed that the majority of those who withdraw from or fail Higher Education courses do so in the first year (Benn, 1995). Recent HESA (2006) statistics confirm this observation with 7.8% of the total first year UK student population in 2001-02 not continuing in any form of Higher Education in the year after entry. A policy of replacing formal examinations at the end of semester one with informal examinations or alternative means of assessment, and giving the students a second attempt within a short period of time to pass them if they fail, could therefore significantly help those students who take longer to adjust to the working environment of university.

The University of Wolverhampton's mission is "*to be a first class regional university dedicated to providing high quality provision so that individuals can realise their full potential and pursue a challenging and dynamic career.*" Helping students make the transition from secondary level to tertiary level education and ultimately progressing through to course completion is therefore key to the University's mission statement. As such the University has changed both its assessment strategy and retention policy for year one students.

RELEVANCE TO THE STAR GUIDELINES

At its outset the STAR project researched, produced and published a set of guidelines based on the causes of student attrition and which pointed the way towards possible good practice. The STAR guidelines relevant to this case study are:

> 2.2 Induction activities should highlight students' academic obligations and the obligations of the staff to the students.

> 3.3 Students should receive regular, formative evaluations of their work early in

their course or course component.

Cook *et al.* (2005)

THE PRACTICE

In the 2002-03 academic year, the re-assessment strategy for the BioSciences Division of the School of Applied Sciences was introduced both in response to a policy change on student assessment at University level and a drive towards promoting retention. Course timetables were reworked and the number of contact hours with the students reduced by an average of around ten percent. The number of taught weeks was also reduced so that there would be time for assessment and then, if necessary, re-assessment within each module. Formal examinations were not scheduled in semesters one, three and five and were only conducted at the end of semesters two, four and six. The assessment and re-assessment strategy for each module was explained to students in each module guide. It is outlined in Table 1.

Semester One

The most significant component of the strategy was the widespread introduction of class tests in semester one taking place no later than week 13, the penultimate week of teaching, after one induction week and 11 weeks of lectures. These replaced the formal end-of-semester examinations in week 15. A student who failed this class test could be re-assessed either in week 15 or in the inter-semester reading week. The re-assessment was treated as a formal resit for which the maximum mark was a pass. The nature of these re-sits varied from equivalent papers through to seen tests or conventional coursework assignments.

Semester 1	Week 13	Informal tests
		Feedback on tests
		Revision workshops
	Week 15	Re-assessment

Semester 2	Week 2	Feedback on Semester one
	Week 13	Formal examinations
		Feedback on examinations
		Remedial tutorials
		Recovery packs
	June/July	Re-assessment

Table 1: The re-assessment strategy timetable.

With the revised teaching schedule, module teaching teams were able to timetable feedback sessions on the end of module assessments and revision workshops before the re-assessment of students. These normally consisted of a group session followed by individual advice to address specific areas of academic study. This exercise supported the statement in the strategy that the re-assessment offers "*a real opportunity for students to improve their performance*".

An internal subject board meeting was held at the end of semester one "*to monitor student progress and inform personal year tutors and professional skills tutors about students who are at risk of generally under-performing*". Feedback to the students was provided as soon as possible, generally by the end of the second teaching week of semester two.

Semester Two

Formal examinations were scheduled after 13 weeks of teaching in semester two, starting at the end of May. However, the re-assessment of these end-of-year examinations was moved from September to June/July. This meant that the re-sits were closer to the delivery of teaching and so the information was relatively 'fresh' in the minds of the students. It also provided some time for remedial tutorials. In order to maintain a commonality of approach with other assessment patterns within the University, formal re-assessment grades were again limited to a pass mark.

Failure in any of the terminal examinations for semester two modules was reported to the students after the subject board meeting and students were given another chance to pass these modules, either by formal re-examination or a 'recovery pack'. Recovery packs can be issued along with notification of failure. The packs varied between modules but examples included problem solving exercises, coursework essays, on-line tests or short answer assignments, depending on the module criteria.

The main advantages of the new assessment strategy included scheduled examination feedback, remedial help and timeliness of re-assessment. The results of this strategy have been an overall improvement in module pass rates with a greater involvement of students in the learning process and students being able to identify their own learning needs. This has also had the knock-on benefit of feeding through to improved retention.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

The main resource implications of the new assessment strategy were on staff time. Although formal contact time with the students was reduced, greater time was spent on providing remedial help. More time and effort was also needed for the design of re-assessments and revision workshops.

EVALUATION

Staff believe that the changed assessment strategy has had an overall improvement on student retention and progression.

> "*It is difficult to single out this approach as we changed both our assessment strategy and retention policy for year one. We have had an overall improvement in our student retention and progression, but whether this is due to the assessment or the retention and progression project it is hard to tell.*"

One student commented on the effect of passing examinations has had on confidence.

> "*Well I didn't get the grades I wanted, but doing these modules, I'm passing them, it's giving me confidence and I'm thinking, I'm passing them so I think it's beneficial.*"

Others commented on how the University helped them prepare in advance for their assessments by:

> "*… giving us specific self directed study time around test times, and we were also always advised to read through the practical methods prior to the practical sessions.*"

The advanced warning of examinations given to students at the beginning of term also received favourable comments. One student also commented on how they appreciated the chance to be re-assessed in their tutorial module.

> "*I find tutorials brilliant as my progress is constantly assessed and I am given the chance to rectify my mistakes.*"

The implementation of the reassessment strategy has had many positive consequences. These include the following advantages for the student:

> Formally timetabled feedback sessions on terminal examinations;
>
> Timely reassessment whilst learned materials are still fresh in the student's mind; and
>
> Opportunities within the academic calendar to provide tutorial support concentrating on areas of weakness identified in the first attempt and before re-assessment.

… and the following advantages for the staff:

Improved retention;

The ability to offer tailored help to students; and

> Freeing the August/September period entirely from marking and the subsequent administration of referred candidates. In contrast to having this free time at the end of the academic year (June/July) at the end of an arduous period of teaching, staff are at their freshest after the summer vacation and this provides quality-time at the start of the academic year.

The construction of the re-assessment strategy may result in students not taking the first attempt at assessments seriously and attempting to spread the assessments over a longer period of time. This concern was recognized early and the following points need bearing in mind:

Since the re-assessment has simply been moved from the end of August to within the module timetable this change simply offers no more opportunities for re-taking assessments than other, more traditional, systems. Students are made aware of this when embarking on the module with the re-assessment times being integrated into the module timetable.

The philosophy of most students has remained to attempt to pass the module at the first opportunity. The change to re-assessment within the module appears to have lead to no increase in the numbers of students who have had to attempt reassessment.

CONCLUSION

As with many initiatives aimed at improving student performance, progression and retention, many practices are changed simultaneously. The attribution of effectiveness therefore remains a problem. Nevertheless, it is clear that the opportunity of remedial support followed by timely re-assessment can have the effect of boosting student confidence and performance.

CONTEXT

University of Wolverhampton	12,612 full-time undergraduates
	5,211 part-time undergraduates
	794 staff
Biosciences Division, School of Applied Sciences	120 Bioscience undergraduate students
	40% male, 60% female
	19 Academic staff
	3 demonstrators
	10-20% mature students via access course
	$^2/_3$ of students live in the West Midlands and the majority live at home

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Student Messenger: the Role of SMS Text Messaging in Supporting Student Transition to University

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SUMMARY

This case study explored the potential of SMS text messaging as a communication

mechanism to support first year students. This was done by implementing and evaluating 'Student Messenger', a computer program that allows university staff to contact students via SMS text messaging. Student Messenger was used to send administrative and 'supportive' text messages to a cohort of first year students and the initiative was evaluated through qualitative interviews with 30 recipients of the messages. The findings showed that students use text messaging far more widely than any other communication technology. Text messages sent by university staff were received sooner and by more students than were e-mails. We conclude that careful use of Student Messenger has the potential to support first year students by providing timely information about administrative procedures and helping to strengthen relationships between staff and students.

Keywords: Transition to university, text messaging, mobile phones, computer-mediated communication.

INTRODUCTION

The mobile phone is now a ubiquitous possession amongst university students and it has considerable potential as a communication medium between the university and students and as a means of enhancing students' social integration with their peers. Although mobile phones and, in particular, SMS text messaging are heavily implicated in the negotiation of social networks for young people (Taylor and Harper, 2001) their potential contribution to the process of transition to Higher Education has received little attention (Harley *et al.*, 2005). This case study reports ways in which text messaging might be used to support first year students. We used 'Student Messenger', a computer program that allows academic and administrative staff to contact students via text messaging. Student Messenger was developed by a member of the case study team (Dave Harley). It will run on any computer and will send text messages to the mobile phones of groups of students or individuals.

Student Messenger was used to send text messages to level one students on the Applied Social Science Undergraduate Programme at the University of Brighton to support them during their transition to university. This is a crucial period during which students are not only developing new academic skills but are also engaged in a complex process of renegotiating their social networks (Wilcox *et al.*, 2005). The initiative was evaluated through qualitative interviews with participating students. The interviews also explored students' use of communicative technologies more broadly.

The aims were:
- To explore the potential of SMS text messaging as a communication mechanism to support first year students; and

- To implement Student Messenger and evaluate its effectiveness in supporting students' transition to university.

RELEVANCE TO THE STAR GUIDELINES

At its outset the STAR project researched, produced and published a set of guidelines based on the causes of student attrition and which pointed the way towards possible good practice. The STAR guidelines relevant to this case study are:

> 2.4. Induction events should provide the foundations for social interactions between students and the development of communities of practice.

We explored ways, in which text messages sent using Student Messenger might be inserted into, and support, the existing text message dialogue among students.

> 2.5. Induction activities should promote the development of good communication between staff and students.

With respect to this guideline we used Student Messenger to enhance communication between the academic department and students.

<div align="right">Cook et al. (2005)</div>

THE PRACTICE

We implemented Student Messenger for first year students during the academic year 2004-05. Mobile phone numbers were collected during the enrolment process. Students were able to opt out simply by ticking a box on a form, but only a few did so. Students were informed that those who opted out would receive the same information as other students, but sent via the University e-mail system instead of text messages.

Three groups of staff were involved in the study: two members of academic staff acting as personal tutors; an administrator; and the School's first year Student Support Tutor (whose

role is to support level one students with a view to improving student retention and progression). The Student Messenger application was installed on to the computers of these staff members. Students' names and mobile phone numbers were then imported into the application from a spreadsheet. Initial installation of Student Messenger and importing student phone numbers into it from a spreadsheet took only a few minutes. Maintaining an up-to-date student list, to keep track of students entering and withdrawing from degrees and changing their mobile phone numbers was, however, an ongoing task. Initial training of staff in the use of the software and, in some cases, use of text messaging took between 30 minutes and an hour for each user. Staff were then able to send text messages to students. This could be done for the whole year group, to individuals or to user-defined groups such as personal tutor groups.

Student Messenger was sometimes used to contact individual students when they did not respond to other forms of communication but the evaluation reported here is concerned with two types of text messages sent to groups of students. Firstly, messages about organisational matters were sent by the administrator to the whole year group and by personal tutors to their tutor groups. Secondly, the Student Support Tutor sent general text messages to the year group. These were sent at points in the academic year that have been

identified as critical for student retention (McGivney, 1996; Mackie, 2001) such as after the Christmas vacation and prior to the examination period. These messages usually took the form of a greeting such as 'Happy New Year!' together with a reminder of some aspect of her role (see Table 1 for examples). In total 10 messages were sent to the whole cohort during the year (seven from the Student Support Tutor and three administrative messages).

EFFECTIVENESS

To evaluate the effectiveness of the system, all first year students were invited to take part in qualitative interviews. This was done through notices posted in the department, an e-mail sent to the year group and inviting participation at a lecture in a module taken by all first year students. From those who volunteered, a sample of 20

Administrative messages

Can you contact me to make an appointment for a tutorial (thanks to those who have already done so). Debbie (sent by Personal Tutor)
PD Session this week on Friday in B218 – no desks just easy chairs! As decided last PD we are doing week ten this week and week nine (presentations) next Thursday. DM (sent by Personal Tutor)

A gentle reminder that essays are back this Thursday best wishes Debbie (sent by Personal Tutor)

Reminder! This week is independent study week – check Student central homepage for advice on prep that you need to do this week, best wishes School Office (sent by Administrator)

General messages to the whole cohort from the Student Support Tutor

 Hope you have had a good first week. Remember if you have any probs, please come and see me or email me on XXX@brighton.ac.uk. Have a good week, Vicky

Happy New Year! Hope u had a good Xmas. Remember drop in sessions r on Mon + Thurs. Vicky

Good Luck in your forthcoming exams – if u r having any last minute worries, please feel free 2 come and c me. Vicky

Table 1: Examples of text messages sent using Student Messenger. (University staff are identified by pseudonyms.)

students, broadly representative of the student population with respect to age and gender, was selected. In addition, students who withdraw from the degree are routinely asked to take part in an exit interview and questions relating to the project were added to these

interviews. The exit interview sample comprised ten students.

The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and were tape-recorded and transcribed in full. The interview guide covered: introductory questions about students' experience of University and the friendship networks they had developed whilst at University; their different uses of communication technologies in their everyday lives; and how they felt about the text messages sent via Student Messenger. Interviews with the main sample took place on the University campus and those with students who withdrew were conducted by telephone. The data analysis sought to identify factors students identified as positive and negative in relation to Student Messenger as well as extracting quantitative and qualitative data about students' use of communications media. In this case study pseudonyms are used for all students and University staff.

Students' use of communication media

Mobile phones were ubiquitous amongst the students in this study. None of the 285 students was excluded from the study as a result of not owning a mobile phone and all interviewees used their mobile phone every day. Text messaging was far more widely used than voice calls; the mean number of texts sent in an average day was 17 compared with 1.6 voice calls. There was however great variation in the frequency of text messaging with the number sent ranging from two to more than 100 per day.

Students used five principal forms of communication media: mobile phones for SMS text messaging (used regularly by all 20 members of the main interview sample); mobile phones for voice calls (used regularly by 19); e-mail (17); landline telephones (4); Instant Messenger-type programs such as MSN Messenger (3). For contacting others text messaging, followed by voice calls from mobile phones, were by far the most frequently used media. E-mail was the third most popular technology but, as Longmate and Baber (2002) found, it was much more often used for receiving messages than for sending them.

A number of factors influenced students' choice of communication technologies. Text messaging was perceived as a much more cost effective means of sending messages than voice calls and this partly explained its popularity. Two other factors, relating to the asynchronous nature of the communication, contributed to the preference for text messages over voice calls:

Text messages allow time to reflect on a reply; and

> For emotionally sensitive messages a text message could be used as an 'emotional buffer' making it easier to deliver a sensitive or less palatable response.

A small minority of students expressed a preference for talking on the phone. Even among this group, however, most used texting as their most common means of communicating because of the financial burden of voice calls on a mobile phone.

Choice of media also depended on the nature of the relationship with the person with whom a student was communicating. Course tutors were an example of relationships perceived as more formal and communication with them was closely associated with the use of e-mail; indeed the University e-mail system was rarely used for any other purpose. Students' personal e-mail accounts, set up through commercial providers, were used in a less formal fashion to communicate in detail with distant friends and relatives.

For longstanding relationships where there were strong emotional ties but face-to-face contact was not possible on a regular basis (for example family relationships when a student had moved away from home to university), there was a need to hear the other person's voice. The telephone held sway here.

A key group of discernible contacts were those pertinent to a student's everyday life. These relationships required frequent contact and updating and hence generating by far the greatest volume of communication. During term-time these relationships were with friends at university and this was where text messaging was most widely used. The nature of communication in these relationships was often seen as instrumental and pragmatic, but its use to provide emotional and social support by maintaining a sense of each other's presence was also important:

> "*If we go out we tend to text each other and say, 'Oh, I am in town, I will be back at so and so', just so you know where people are because obviously it is a bit lonely if no one is in the flat.*"

<div align="right">(Rebecca, 18)</div>

Text messaging was also used to help to make sense of University expectations and check for shared understandings of course requirements. This most often took the form of communicating basic factual information such as times of lectures, essay titles and submission dates.

Evaluation of Student Messenger

As described above, two types of text messages were sent to the entire cohort: general 'greeting' messages from the Student Support Tutor and messages about administrative matters. The usefulness of Student Messenger stemmed from the dominance of text messaging as a channel of communication amongst students and the relatively low usage of e-mail:

> "*I don't know what everyone else is like but I am terrible at checking my e-mail and some people are terrible at checking [the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)] for any information like that, so to get these texts straight to your phone, because we have always got our phones on us no matter where we are.*"

<div align="right">(Lynda, 23)</div>

Students picked up on the urgency of messages which was not apparent in the same information provided in course documentation or on the VLE, for example about coursework deadlines:

> "*Well it has let me know pretty quick and obviously there is a deadline, it has got to be done by next week. But it is good, it has got me sort of doing it, I came in and did it.*"

<div align="right">(Pamela, 37)</div>

The extent to which new students experience difficulty in negotiating unfamiliar academic and administrative systems was revealed by students' comments on the message to which Pamela refers above. For some recipients this message served to alert them not only to the deadline but also to the fact that the assessment task had to be undertaken.

> "*I think [the text messages] were good because some of my friends were like, 'What is this portfolio?'! So for those that don't read the module handbook they get kept up to date.*"

<div align="right">(Matt, 19)</div>

Turning to the more general messages sent by the Student Support Tutor, all interviewees were appreciative of these and many said it gave them a sense of belonging to the University, particularly in the first few weeks. Even though messages were sent out 'en masse' they were still received as if they were personal communications for the receiver alone:

> "*It was nice. I don't know, because university is such a big place, you sometimes feel a bit de-individualized so it is quite nice to know that someone is thinking about you or, if you have got any worries, when your drop in times are.*"

<div align="right">(Rapinder, 20)</div>

Receiving text messages sent via Student Messenger was also sometimes a shared activity:

> "*We were like, 'Oh, I have got a text from Vicky' and some were like, 'Ooh, I haven't got one', and theirs would then come in.*"

<div align="right">(Joanna, 50)</div>

The only negative reactions to the use of Student Messenger arose because some interviewees did not initially expect a university to use text messaging as a means of communication with its students, but these reservations were for the most part quickly overcome:

> "*At first I was a bit sceptical; at uni you don't expect to get a text message from your academic staff, but I then was just thinking that this is a modern uni, modern times, and it is good because it makes the personal tutor more accessible, I think, and it makes you think that they actually care a bit more.*"

Our findings suggest that Student Messenger, used in the ways we have described, can contribute to supporting first year students in two ways. Firstly, text messages from academic staff about administrative issues can be inserted judiciously into the existing text message dialogue amongst students to provide additional assistance at critical points, for example when their first essay is due to be submitted. Our data show that some first year students were unaware of important deadlines and a timely reminder with this kind of factual information can be helpful. This is not merely about providing access to information in another guise but supporting and enhancing the text message dialogue that is already taking place amongst students. Secondly, Student Messenger has a role in social support of first year students. Messages from the Student Support Tutor provided reminders of the formal support systems, supplementing the systems of support students were already operating among themselves. Perhaps more importantly, since students perceived text messages as more personal than e-mail, careful use of texting can help to strengthen relationships between staff and students and contribute to students' sense of belonging to the University.

RESOURCES

The Student Messenger software is available free of charge by registering for an account at www.sms.studentmessenger.co.uk. Text messages then cost 6.5 pence each. For institutions buying in bulk the costs are lower: 10,000 texts cost £600 (6 pence each); 20,000 cost £1,100 (5.5 pence each).

For further information, or to obtain the software on a CD, contact info@studentmessenger.co.uk or d.a.harley@brighton.ac.uk.

PROPOSED FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

We are currently repeating the use of Student Messenger (without the evaluation element) for the 2005-06 cohorts of first year students and we will continue to run the project in the future.

A minor issue that arose in the early stages of the work was that one of the members of staff sending text messages was unfamiliar with the medium, assumed that it operated in the same way as e-mail and, as a result, sent a message without indicating who it was from. This caused some confusion amongst recipients. A related issue is differences of view amongst staff concerning the extent to which text language should be employed in communications from a university. Whilst it is not necessary for all users to make use of text language (see Table 1 for examples of how this varied between staff), a degree of informality is required for effective communication in this medium (Thurlow, 2003; Harley, 2004). When new staff begin to use Student Messenger we will provide some brief training in matters such as these.

In addition to the ways in which we have used Student Messenger in this case study, it has the potential to be used by academic staff teaching on modules, both in relation to academic content and module organisation (Harley, 2004). This is an area we intend to explore in the future.

CONTEXT

Institutional profile	University of Brighton
Course title	Applied Social Science, Undergraduate Programme
Size of intake	285 entrants to level one in 2004-05
% mature	16% are aged 21-25; 10% aged 26 or over
% living at home	52% of level one students live in halls of residence; 38% in private sector rented accommodation or own home; 10% in parental home.
Relevant entrance data	UCAS tariff entry points are 280 for some degrees and 300 for others. 80% of entrants have A/AS level qualifications, 11% have passed an access course and 9% have other qualifications.
Retention data	The retention rate was about 92% for 2004-05 entrants. This includes: 79% who progressed to level two; 2% who intermitted; 2% who continued at level one; 2% who transferred to other degrees within the institution and about 7% who transferred to other institutions (exact figure not yet known).

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Evaluation of an Online PDP System to Support Students Prior to Entry and at Induction

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SUMMARY

The evaluation of this existing online personal development planning (e-PDP) system aimed to find out students' attitudes to the system, in the way it supported learners in their transition to Higher Education and in their first year of study. Transitional support was available between admission and registration during which time new students could use their UCAS number to access a Faculty intranet e-PDP system and to complete an 'expectations of university' form online. The form, which was designed to help raise students' awareness of certain aspects of Higher Education, such as the need for independent study then became their first university-based personal development record.

Evaluations of online PDP provision show that an online approach cannot be expected to replace face-to-face conversation in the support of learners. Furthermore it has been shown that learners are more likely to engage with PDP processes with active staff support and that practice is most effective where PDP processes are integrated into the curriculum, perhaps as part of a tutorial module.

Keywords: Prior to entry, induction, retention, progression, personal development planning.

INTRODUCTION

One of the recommendations of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the Dearing Review, NCIHE, 1997) was that institutions of Higher Education should seek to develop a Progress File, part of which would enable students to monitor, build and reflect upon their performance, learning and achievement and to plan for their personal, career and educational progression. Such processes in Higher Education have since become known as personal development planning (PDP), which is defined as:

> "*A structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to review their performance, learning and achievement, and to plan for their personal, educational and career development.*"

QAA (2002)

The QAA guidelines include a range of additional information about PDP, such as purposes, potential outcomes and benefits, opportunities and entitlements, how it relates to the Higher Education Progress File, responsibilities for provision and policy in relation to implementation.

Sector wide agreed policy is that students across Higher Education for all awards and at all levels would have opportunities for personal development planning from 2005-06.

However, some UK universities, or departments within them, have been implementing PDP processes for more than a decade. Such established practice pre-dated the Dearing review and has contributed substantially to the shaping of sectoral and institutional policies on personal development planning. Guidance materials developed to support learners at that time were generally in paper format. More recently, an increasing number of institutions have chosen to provide tools and guidance for PDP processes online, sometimes associating this with a file upload and storage facility, enabling students not only to make statements of their achievements and to reflect on those, but also to provide evidence in the format of digital files of text, images, video or audio. These more sophisticated online PDP systems, which enable incorporation of documentary evidence, are often known as e-portfolios. Grant *et al*. (2004) describes the relationship between PDP and e-portfolios, including developments relating to e-portfolio purposes and practice, and Grant (2005) clarifies the use of terms and definitions in the context of the e-portfolio domain.

Potential benefits of online PDP systems include:

- Continuous provision, which is especially helpful to distance and part time learners who have significant time and location constraints in accessing more traditional processes of review and guidance;

- Tools to facilitate reflection through self-audit, or to assist planning through selection of either a programme of study, or of options or routes for progression, within a modular programme; and

- Interoperation of a PDP system with the institutional virtual learning environment (VLE) to link curricular learning more effectively with PDP; and interoperation

with institutional Student Records or Management Information Systems (MIS), thus reducing the need to repeatedly re-enter a learner's personal information and to ensure that such information updated in one location is automatically updated in other relevant locations.

The original aim of this project was to evaluate an existing online PDP (e-PDP) system, used in the Faculty of Life Sciences at the University of Manchester and thereby to inform further e-PDP development. The evaluation focused on the use by, and usefulness for, students prior to entry and at induction.

The objectives were:

> To identify factors which engage students in the use of e-PDP processes, especially pre-entry and during induction; and

> To use this information to inform future development of e-PDP support and practice.

During the project, it became apparent that increasing numbers of Higher Education institutions were introducing online PDP systems. This has provided an opportunity to broaden the scope of the case study to explore wider issues raised through review and evaluation of additional online PDP systems.

RELEVANCE TO THE STAR GUIDELINES

At its outset the STAR project researched, produced and published a set of guidelines based on the causes of student attrition and which pointed the way towards possible good practice (Cook *et al.,* 2005).

The Guidelines being addressed in this case study relate to induction processes and are as follows:

> 2.3 Induction activities should support the development of those independent study habits suitable for higher education.

The pre-registration activity of the 'Expectations of University' self-evaluation form of the online PDP supports and raises awareness of the need for independent study.

> 2.4 Induction events should provide the foundations for social interactions between students and the development of communities of practice.

Induction activities include an introduction to 'My Tutor Group' e-mail services, the 'Bulletin Board' service and 'Announcement' services that encourage interaction and the development of social and academic communities between students.

2.5 Induction activities should promote the development of good communication between staff and students.

The induction to 'My PDP' promotes and encourages students to 'share' their self-evaluation forms with their personal tutors and the 'My Tutor Group' and 'Bulletin Boards' also encourage good communication between students and staff.

THE PRACTICE

The Faculty introduced a significantly enhanced version of its existing on-line interactive PDP in 2003. The new PDP system was incorporated within 'My Intranet' to which each student has personal access and storage space. The system was set up so that it was more explicitly integrated with other elements of provision and so that a student could opt to share parts of their e-PDP with their tutor if they wished.

The e-PDP was made available to first year students in 2003-04 and this was extended to level two in 2004-05. This has been cascaded out to placement and final years as students have progressed through their programmes. Thus the e-PDP has continued to prompt students to undertake relevant PDP activities at transitions between years, including during preparation for a placement and return from placement, and on transition to employment.

An outline of the use of the e-PDP in year one is shown in Figure 1. It incorporated two features that were unusual in online systems at that time. The first was a facility for students to log on as soon as they received their joining (registration) instructions using their UCAS number. They could then complete a pre-registration 'Expectations of University' self-evaluation form that prompted reflection and action planning before they arrived to register. This form became the first personal development record (PDR) of the reflective practice that would be prompted during their Higher Education study and stored as part of their Progress File. The second unusual feature was 'date-related prompts', which were designed to remind students to engage in PDP processes and to complete a curricular PDR at key times when PDP activities were related directly to academic activities, e.g. self-review of skills developed through a recently completed tutorial assignment (such as problem solving, group work, poster preparation or oral communication).

The evaluation focused on how the system was used, by how many students, the profile of students who did or did not engage with it readily, when and where they used it, their reasons for doing so (or not) and how it might be improved.

There have been three strands to the evaluation process:

> Quantitative data on student uptake and completion of personal development records (PDRs);

> One-to-one semi-structured interviews in March/April 2004; and

> Focus group semi-structured interviews in April/May 2005.

Figure 1: Suggested time line for use of PDP in year one.

Interviews have been both with students who have completed all or most of the PDRs associated with tutorial assignments to date and with students who have engaged, but less often. The latter interviews were to identify learners' reasons for low engagement and to explore suggested 'solutions', e.g. how to make the process more 'relevant' to them.

Evaluation interviews have focused on exploring and identifying:

> Reasons why students use/do not use the e-PDP self assessment forms;

> What works well in the e-PDP and what does not work so well; and

> How students would like to see the e-PDP developed, particularly in relation to improving support at induction.

During the project, as data were collected, the evaluation questionnaires were adapted to focus on different aspects of support and guidance and were used as the basis for semi-structured interviews.

Initial findings from the March 2004 evaluation interviews were used to inform Faculty development of the e-PDP and thus to benefit the new student cohort starting in September 2004. Further evaluation was undertaken in 2005.

EFFECTIVENESS

Effectiveness as Judged by Evaluation Outcomes

Students taking part in the evaluations were generally satisfied with the online PDP resources. However, they made a number of recommendations to enhance the online PDP support process.

Evaluation in 2003-04

Recommendations related to two main issues. The first was a request for increased tutor involvement to improve student motivation. The second was a more specific suggestion by a small group of students (who study a foreign language as part of the degree) to time the PDP prompts differently for them, as they follow a different academic tutorial programme.

Recommendations

The main recommendations related to various ways to increase student motivation and engagement. These were to:

Increase tutor involvement, e.g.

> "*Make sure tutors know about this system. Get tutors to promote the use of the PDP more – if tutors say students should do it, they will.*"

> Although all students felt that better tutor support was important, the more

highly motivated students had completed the PDRs despite their perceived lack of tutor support.

Make PDP a bigger part of tutorials, e.g.

"Link PDP more closely into tutorials – e.g. creating a PowerPoint presentation should be a secondary skill for a tutorial, and the more important aspect is to ensure people develop their thinking skills, and are challenged to think and to contribute more opinions to the tutorial."

"Make it compulsory to complete forms and to contribute 20% to the tutorial marks, so Tutorial Work and Attendance is not complete until this is done."

Students felt that entries would only need monitoring, not reading, and that *"If students choose to write rubbish in the form, this is 'up to them' – it is their time that is wasted."*

Include a form for reflecting on informal learning through extra-curricular activities and interests, e.g.

"Make the questionnaire shorter and more relevant to student life rather than just the academic side."

(The students helped to devise questions appropriate for this from their viewpoint.)

Take care over words used in PD questions, e.g.

"Avoid being patronizing."

Help more with CV building, e.g.

"Include in year one PDP an example CV resource, or links to building a CV resource."

Screen display – make more interesting and engaging. When it was explained that this might conflict with SENDA (2001), they re-considered:

"At least vary colour of font and bullet points, and highlight paragraphs to draw attention to them."

They would like learner controlled screen display settings for font and background colour.

Progress chart – students recommended inclusion of a chart for each learner which shows their assignment marks, to indicate progress.

Prompts location – their suggested locations to make prompts more obvious included:

"The FLS intranet homepage";

> "*The log in screen or in a pop-up window – like an advert*";

"*By e-mail*"; and

> "*Tutors to give prompts too, at end of an assignment – this gives value to completing PDP forms.*"

Student Uptake: Completion of Personal Development Records

Quantitative data on student uptake and completion of PDRs were gathered electronically, without accessing personal information. Table 1 shows the number of students who have completed various online PD records.

Repeated data collection to monitor use has demonstrated that whilst some students completed the expectations form before registration, other students did so after they arrived. A few were completed several months later!

The data for numbers of students engaging with PDP activities for 2004-05 were updated in June 2005 and comparison with data collected previously (April 2005) showed a continuous, although small increase in completion of 'earlier PDP forms' (including, as noted above, for the 'expectations form').

It may be noted that only one student had used the 'notes' form. This form has no specific link to any assignment or 'directed' activity and was included as a result of a 'central' (institutional) recommendation. The low take-up indicated how important it was for students to see the forms as relevant to themselves and their on-going activities. This was in marked contrast to the much higher take-up of the 'expectations of university' form or the 'self-assessment of transferable skills' form. However, in their feedback, students requested extra-curricular PDRs to complete, for which the 'notes' could have been used and experience at some Higher Education institutions has shown a preference for extra-curricular based PDRs.

	Academic Year	
PDP Activity	2003-04	2004-05
PDP 'ad hoc' notes	1	0
Expectations of University	119	79
Transferable Skills – Level one	169	105
Learning Log – Short Essay	94	50
Learning Log – Numerical Problems	76	41
Semester Review – one	50	N/A
Learning Log – Poster Presentation	67	36

Skills Review – Level one	31	14
Learning Log – Group Based Learning two	24	43
Semester Review – two	19	N/A
Learning Log – Case Study	N/A	10
Total participating students	177	126

Table 1: The number of students who have completed various online PD records. Numbers refer to the students undertaking the associated activity and include only those still registered in June 2005.

Even the lower uptake during the 2004-05 academic year appeared to be considerably higher than when students were using predominantly paper based PDP materials. Those previous data were indicative rather than directly comparable, however, as they were based on surveys of student perceptions of PDP processes and of skills self-assessment, rather than on monitoring completion of PDRs per se (Quinlan and Richardson, 2001).

The number of students who completed one or more self-assessment personal development records in 2003-04 is shown in Table 2.

No of students	%	Number of self assessments completed
201	57.4	One or more completed
151	43.1	>= 2
108	30.9	>= 3
85	24.3	>= 4
75	21.4	>= 5
64	18.3	>= 6
52	14.9	>= 7
44	12.6	>= 8
30	8.6	>= 9
24	6.9	>= 10

Table 2: The number of students completing self-assessment personal development records in 2003-04.

EVALUATIONS OF SOME OTHER E-PDP SYSTEMS

Colleagues with a remit for the development and implementation of online PDP systems supporting first year students at other universities, including the University of Liverpool

and the University of Ulster, have contributed evaluation materials and data for this case study derived from recent evaluations of their online e-PDP systems, LUSID (Liverpool University Student Interactive Database) and PDS (Personal Development System) , respectively.

At the University of Liverpool, the use of the online PDP tool, LUSID, was extended in 2003-04 to pilot the use by students at a partner Further Education College. The students were 'non-traditional' students, most of whom were mature and without formal qualifications at National Qualifications Framework Levels one to three. They were in the first two years (year zero and one) of a BSc Honours Psychology degree delivered in Further Education. Successful students can progress automatically into year two of the degree programme at the University of Liverpool. Within the Higher Education in Further Education provision, a specific module, together with close tutoring and feedback systems provided recognisable PDP opportunities. However, no formal PDR was being developed and the University, which had itself been developing separate and different PDP processes, had taken no explicit cognizance of the College's PDP environment. A project was undertaken to trial the use of the University's online PDP tool, LUSID, at the College. This created a PDR for each College student, and provided an opportunity for evaluation of that provision by the College students.

Evaluation was undertaken through small group meetings, immediately after some key PDP activities and through questionnaire data.

The students' evaluations were developed by academic staff into a set of recommendations, focused on pedagogy as well as on the system itself and are summarized here. They provide important messages for institutions considering implementation and evaluation of an online PDP system to support learners.

> Distinguish between the evaluation of the pedagogic issues and the technological issues of the system and its support:
>
>> "*Any developments with new technology systems need time and effort for familiarization and ironing out usability problems. Allow for this, and ensure that projects extend over sufficient time to get beyond these hurdles and start to gather feedback relevant to the ideas delivered through the technology, and not just feedback on the surface features of the technology systems.*"
>
> Allow sufficient time for the intervention being evaluated to have impact:
>
>> "*Any evaluation of interventions, designed to develop a learner's awareness, confidence and skills as a learner, needs to be able to follow the learners through more than one 'cycle' of education. In this case, we only developed the activities we wanted to evaluate in the second year of the project, so only immediate feedback is possible.*"
>
> When using a system to support learners moving from Higher Education in a

Further Education environment to an Higher Education institution, be aware of the differences in culture and support levels between Further Education and Higher Education and take this into account when evaluating perceptions of use and impact:

"*An important focus (of the project) was the recognition that provision related to learners who were moving from one educational context to another, where there was a decreasing level of individually-delivered support for learning.*"

The recommendations also included the need for more generic guidance on setting up and developing PDP programmes and systems, particularly in contexts where learners are expected to make transitions from environments of high support to those with lower support. These include:

"*Discuss the fact of change of level of support with learners*";

"*Design review structures and instruments (documentation, etc.) so that the student has the greatest appropriate sense of involvement in making PDP-related decisions*"; and

"*Develop and motivate staff so that they have the skills and attitudes to foster a sense of learner ownership of the decisions.*"

The full recommendations are published as part of the report of the TransPortALL project (Strivens, 2005).

At the University of Ulster, in 2005, 170 students across 19 programmes and 51 staff across 13 programmes completed questionnaires that included questions about attitudes to personal development processes (e.g. whether 'important') and perceptions of the 'usefulness' of individual sections of the Personal Development System. These were not specifically related to pre-entry or induction issues, but some findings are included here to illustrate information that may be useful for others considering how to take forward developments in this area. For example, the findings indicated general agreement between students and staff in respect of PDP processes perceived as important in personal development and of aspects of personal development that were facilitated through use of the PD System, as shown in Table 3 (copied with permission from the PDS evaluation report prepared by the University of Ulster, 2005).

A key finding of evaluations of online PDP provision has been that, whilst online provision may have provided added value in terms of re-use of prepared materials and flexibility relating to time and location of use, an online approach cannot be expected to replace face-to-face conversation in the review process supporting learners. Two additional key findings related to PDP more generally, especially in the context of staff and curriculum development, irrespective of whether resources and records were online. These findings were:

That learners were more likely to engage with PDP processes where they were encouraged by academic staff, e.g. by expressing a supportive view of PDP as a useful process, perhaps by linking these processes to CPD in employment; and

That practice was most effective where PDP processes were integrated within the curriculum, perhaps as part of a tutorial module, rather than as a 'bolt-on' extra.

FUTURE PLANS

Increasing numbers of UK universities are planning to implement online PDP/e-portfolio systems. This section aims to facilitate their future plans by signposting the guidance now available to support the development of effective learner centred online PDP and portfolio systems.

	Students		Staff	
Feature	Importance	Facilitated	Importance	Facilitated
Take responsibility for your own development	93%	79%	100%	94%
Become a more effective and independent learner	69%	87%	65%	100%
A tool for evaluating own learning and developing skills of reflection	92%	81%	94%	94%
A framework for setting goals and planning actions	52%	86%	59%	100%

Compiling a record of experience-based achievements	83%	79%	100%	82%
Increasing self-awareness of your skills, qualities, attitudes and responsibilities	77%	88%	88%	94%
Being better prepared for employment and professional practice	88%	63%	94%	65%

Table 3: Attitudes to the Personal Development Planning Process. Percentages refer to the number of students or staff agreeing with the stated feature of the University of Ulster PDS. 'Importance' indicates the importance attached to the feature within the degree programme and 'Facilitated' the extent to which the feature was thought to be promoted through PDS.

The appropriate engagement with PDP processes has been shown to benefit learners. For example a study by Gough *et al.* (2003) undertook a systematic mapping and synthesis of PDP related research. It showed that there were positive effects of the processes associated with PDP on learning outcomes in terms both of student attainment and in approaches to learning. From a different perspective the report of a questionnaire survey designed to identify factors driving the adoption of Progress Files in Higher Education, showed that the most frequently perceived driver to adoption was the 'enhancement of employability': cited by 61 of 73 Higher Education institutions which responded. This was followed by 'inclusion within Quality Assurance reference points' (55), 'retention' (39) and 'widening participation' (39). Far fewer respondents identified 'student demand' (17), 'employer demand' (13) or 'staff demand' (11) as drivers (Brennan and Shah, 2003).

Over the past few years, increasingly sophisticated e-portfolio systems and tools have been developed. The emphasis has largely focused on functional requirements of such systems, including those which will allow learner information to be shared with other systems within the same institution (e.g. the VLE and student record system), or transferred and read by systems in other institutions (both of which are termed 'interoperability'). Such information sharing has an important role to play in support of learners across transitions, including in situations where learners are contemporaneously registered at, or working and learning in, more than one institution or organization. Many of these developments have come about as a result of the JISC e-learning strand of programmes, including the Managed Learning

Environments for Lifelong Learning (MLEs4LL) Programme. Of particular relevance to the STAR project objectives of supporting learners across transitions (Cook *et al.*, 2005), outcomes of the MLEs4LL programme have included a series of briefing papers in the area of e-portfolios, cross-institutional provision and lifetime learning across the educational landscape (JISC, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c), whilst individual MLEs projects have demonstrated how such interoperation may work in practice.

Two examples, which relate to interoperation of cross-sectoral collaborative provision of online support for personal development planning processes, are:

> Progress in the development of web-based UCAS application processes. These include a technical framework for enhancing learner information within a personal statement and the contribution this may make to a 'presentational' portfolio, as part of a more flexible admissions process to support a wider range of learners (Smallwood, 2005); and

> Online personal development planning support is being developed for mature, employed learners studying for a degree part-time (Lodge and Smith, 2005).

A third example in respect of collaborative provision (more broadly than for PDP support), relates to good practice in embedding e-learning to support mature learners registered on Foundation Degrees (Smith and Buckler, 2005).

To facilitate the process of developing or selecting an effective learner centred e-portfolio system, Ward and Richardson (2005) have provided guidance for institutions implementing PDP through e-portfolio systems. The guidance includes a planning tool indicating functional requirements to be taken into account in the development or purchase of online portfolio systems.

Such e-system developments align with recent national policy initiatives, which have encouraged collaborative provision through partnerships both at cross-sectoral level (DfES e-strategy, 2005) and at cross institutional level (HEFCE strategy for e-learning, 2005), with use of common systems and open standards for electronic learning, administration and business systems, to facilitate support of learners in a more joined up way across different episodes of learning. These developments support progress towards the possibility of provision of a personal electronic portfolio for all Higher Education students in the medium term, as envisaged in the Burgess Report (UUK, 2004).

RESOURCES

The development costs for the interactive online system in 2002-03 were just under £10,000, which was the amount of funding made available to employ a developer for six months. The project was successfully completed in that time including an evaluation of existing practices, needs analysis, design documentation, build and roll-out to first year

students.

There was then a small but significant resource implication to create the PDP content for the following years of undergraduate study, of approximately one working week for the following two years. This has now been completed and the PDP system now supports all three years of undergraduate study. With the annual PDP review, it is expected that the content and activities of the PDP system will continue to develop in line with the continuing developments of Faculty learning and teaching but anticipated changes will be negligible in terms of administrative overhead.

The most substantial long term resource implication of PDP support will probably continue to be the time of academics, irrespective of whether guidance and tools are online. However, most of the time committed to supporting PDP arises naturally in a personal tutor's role in supporting student development and will depend on institutional policy on PDP and the model of personal tutor support.

CONTEXT

The University of Manchester	Academic year 2005-06
University	25,683 undergraduate and 9,000 postgraduate students
	>10,000 staff in institution
Faculty of Life Sciences	
	1,844 undergraduate students
	231 staff
	>1000 people involved in research
Biological Sciences	Approximately 20 modular degrees, ranging from Anatomical to Zoological Sciences, each supported with three or four year options
Intake	648 year one students (including 44 Erasmus, who attend in year one only)
% mature	57 year one students aged 21 and above
% living at home	66 year one students (excluding Erasmus) have the same home and term time address

Relevant entrance data	An offer is made on the basis of performance at interview, information on the UCAS form and predicted academic performance
	In 2004-05, the average qualification on entry was 320 UCAS points, ABB
Retention data	2005-06: 9 of 631 students left early (1.4%)

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June/July

Refine practice

May/June

Evaluation

Week 0: follow up meeting with personal tutor and/or peer mentor

August

September

In pre-registration Welcome pack, invitation to access Faculty intranet using UCAS number and to complete 'Expectations of University' form

1. Date-related prompts – to reflect on recently completed tutorial assignments
2. Monitor use

1st and 2nd semesters