

# Compendium of effective practice in higher education: Volume 2

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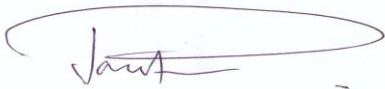
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## Foreword

Written at a time of unparalleled social and economic change and uncertainty, this Compendium provides a unique insight into how universities are seeking to promote a positive learning experience for students enrolled across a range of programmes in the UK and further afield. The notion of ‘innovation for learning’ underpins many of the interventions discussed, showing that despite unprecedented cutbacks and changes, colleagues across the sector continue to work hard to promote a positive and meaningful student experience.

Encapsulating a wide variety of opportunities for engaging students, the following pages reinforce previous arguments that there is not a single ‘correct’ approach to enhancing the student experience. Looking through the pages of this Compendium, the need for institutions, colleagues and students to work together to stimulate a “win-win-win” situation becomes ever more apparent. While student belonging remains key to success, other factors such as the use of proactive support systems, including mentoring and tutoring, combine with the implementation of forward-thinking staff-development interventions and the appropriate use of learning technologies to contribute to a synergetic and cohesive learning experience.

Although many of the interventions showcased in this Compendium focus on one particular programme, the potential for cross-disciplinary learning and the sharing of good practice is boundless. Each of the different interventions described in the following pages may be adapted or amended to suit individual and organisational needs and requirements. Built on an ethos of “sharing good practice”, this Compendium represents more than a pedagogical tool: it is a living document and a testament to the efforts of colleagues and students working together to promote excellence in learning and teaching. What is evident from the following papers is that the higher education sector in the UK and elsewhere has much to offer. Indeed, it is vital to the future success of global society.



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# Introduction

The UK higher education sector is currently undergoing a period of unprecedented change, with the way in which university is perceived and experienced rapidly evolving as policy drivers influence not only how education is funded, but also what students expect from their time at university. More than ever, employability is a priority for all stakeholders, with employers, parents and students alike keen to know how a degree will equip future graduates with the skills and competencies necessary to succeed in the workplace. Concurrently, international competition is forcing many universities to look outside their traditional boundaries and in doing so seek to recruit potential students from across the world. With the concept of the 'global student' becoming a reality across almost all programmes offered in the UK, the challenge for institutions is not only how to attract more students, but also how to engage and retain those students following recruitment.

Set against the backdrop of raised student expectations, many institutions are actively seeking new ways to enhance the student experience. In doing so, a range of different interventions has been developed, tried and tested – with curriculum development and pedagogic practice becoming increasingly valid areas of academic research. It is within this setting that this second edition of the *Compendium of effective practice* is launched. Colleagues from across the UK sector and internationally have contributed their ideas and interventions to what has become a snapshot of good practice in 2013. Developing the work conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation under the auspices of the What Works? programme, the Compendium is divided into six distinctive categories – each one looking at a different area of the student experience. The six categories are:

- 1** Transition: This section explores all aspects of transition from the move into university onwards.
- 2** Learning and teaching: Different approaches aimed at fostering independent learning and promoting student success are discussed.
- 3** Supporting students: Student support is cultivated through interventions such as peer mentoring and the integration of current students.
- 4** Participation and belonging: The interventions in this section address the way institutions promote student engagement to develop a sense of belonging.
- 5** Utilisation of data and information communication technologies: This section discusses how data and technology can be used to support and enhance learning.
- 6** Strategic change: The six interventions discussed in this section demonstrate broad and creative approaches to bringing about strategic change.

This Compendium offers interventions which not only aid student transition but also promote staff development in learning and teaching. Many layers of support are proposed which engage students across an array of modules, courses and disciplines.

## Section I: Transition

The Compendium opens by introducing a number of effective interventions aimed at improving the transition of students into higher education. Ten different interventions are presented, each one aimed at enhancing pre-entry or post-entry transition in a bid to tackle attrition.

The first article, by Laura Birch *et al.*, describes the impact of printed pre-arrival guides issued to new students at the University of Manchester. Written by the previous year's first-year intake, the guides offer academic and social support. Following this, John Knight and Rebecca Rochon of Buckingham New University explore the engagement of students through a social networking platform, Ning. The use of online social networking at the University of Brighton is then discussed by Joanna MacDonnell.

A different perspective is offered by Kenny Archibald and Karen Smales, who show how the Study Skills Summer School at the University of Hull tackles transition by offering a 'real' university experience. The next paper, by Emily Danvers and Beverley Crooks, describes Headstart Week, an event held at Brunel University before induction that engages underrepresented students such as carers and those with disabilities. Another intervention which specifically targets Foundation students is the Transition Day, described by Carol Wilson of Edge Hill University.

The final four papers in this section present interventions which engage students starting university. Laura Jones *et al.* from the University of Worcester discuss a first year tutor scheme which offers bespoke student support. Following on, Sally Alford and Claire Eustance present an intervention from the University of Greenwich which aims to increase understanding and communication amongst staff and students.

The importance of student involvement in promoting engagement is then discussed by Nicola Poole of Cardiff Metropolitan University, who highlights the importance of involving first-year students in the redesign of the following year's induction period. The final paper in this first section by Benske *et al.* discusses the development and use of a platform aimed at integrating students and promoting staff-student collaboration at Glasgow Caledonian University.

## 'Academic and social survival guides': Student- produced pre-induction/pre-arrival material

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### Keywords

- pre-arrival
- student experience
- engagement
- peer support
- transition

### Nature of intervention

Pre-arrival information; hints and tips produced for incoming Year 1 students written by students involved in peer support from the same discipline at the University of Manchester.

### Focus of intervention

The intervention is both academic and social in nature and is aimed at enhancing the student experience through improving student transition.

### Description of intervention

The University of Manchester runs two very successful peer support programmes: Peer Mentoring and Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS). Higher-year students either mentor lower-year students or facilitate academic discussion and problem solving in PASS. These programmes are run in more than 60 disciplines across all four faculties with over 1,500 student volunteers. Consequently, peer support is offered to about 10,000 undergraduate students.

Peer support has four overarching aims:

- to enhance the quality, quantity and diversity of student learning within a discipline;
- to involve students as partners in their learning experience;
- to provide further opportunity for the development of intellectual and professional competencies;
- to provide students with a supportive environment to assist the transition into and through higher education.

Therefore, it helps to create a sense of community and belonging for those students who engage with the programme.

One way of delivering these aims is through the production of pre-arrival material. Over half of the peer support schemes produce pre-arrival guides, which are sent out to new students with their acceptance letters from the school. These guides are in addition to any material produced by the institution or school. Some of the content of the guides may be similar to that of material produced by staff, but it is written from a student perspective and will often reference the material produced by the school or institution.

The production of the pre-arrival guides started in 2001 and typically includes:

- information about the peer support scheme and how to contact peer mentors or PASS leaders;
- social information (good places to eat and drink, how to join societies and teams);
- budgeting information (cheap travel options, cheapest place to buy groceries);
- degree information (top tips for progressing through their degree, library links);
- support services available at the institution.

These pre-arrival guides are written to help students prepare for life at the university and to help them with the transition period from whichever route they have come. Due to the size of the university (we have 29,000 undergraduate students), many students say that the first few weeks are overwhelming. However, the guides offer assistance as the content is written

by current students who have already been through the transition process. By reviewing this every year, the guides offer students comfort and support in one of the most challenging transition phases for new students. The guides also promote the peer support schemes which operate in almost all schools at the university, notifying the new students of the support options available once they arrive and improving retention rates.

The guides are primarily written by student co-ordinators (experienced PASS leaders or peer mentors who have taken on more of a co-ordination role for their scheme), who will write them in conjunction with other PASS leaders/peer mentors from the peer support scheme. They will meet other co-ordinators from different schemes across the university at a student co-ordinator meeting to share ideas and good practice about the guides. These meetings are organised by Students as Partners (SaP) programme staff, who are based centrally to co-ordinate the peer support schemes across the university and arrange the production of all the guides. The university's SaP programme is sponsored by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) who provide templates for the guide covers, allowing students to design and personalise their discipline's front and back cover. Students provide content based on their own transition experiences into university, particularly identifying information which was missing or could have been provided sooner. The information about the course or school is approved by a member of staff from the discipline and the content is evaluated to ensure it is appropriate for students. The glossy covers are printed by PwC and the content of the guides printed internally. The final guides are bound and sent to schools, ready to be distributed with the new students' acceptance letters.

The guides are reviewed and revised each year, with student co-ordinators amending as they see fit. Usually, they are only made from scratch when a scheme has not produced a guide before. Even in this case, they will often take relevant information from other guides and make necessary amendments to make it more specific to their discipline.

### **How the intervention engages students**

From their first introduction, the guides were student driven. Some peer mentors attended a peer support conference in 2000, saw other institutions were producing booklets rather than welcome letters and decided to develop this idea in Manchester.

The approach of material being "written by students for students" by PASS leaders/peer mentors creates a strong culture for each peer support scheme and develops a community. This intervention also reminds current students of their initial experience of the transition process, helping them to relate better to their mentees and PASS attendees, thereby increasing engagement and improving the impact of the peer support activity. Importantly, the growth of the guides each year (but building on previous work) helps to keep students engaged year on year. As well as the producers of the guide, the engagement of the lower-year students also increases as they are aware of peer support before arriving on campus and therefore have clearer expectations. Interestingly, the by-product of raising families' or carers' awareness appears to have an indirect, positive effect on encouraging students to engage in activities led by their peers.

### **Link to What Works? findings**

At the heart of the What Works? Student Retention and Success programme is the theme of student engagement, where an effective intervention requires early engagement within the academic sphere. The pre-arrival guide is an intervention which is clearly focused on 'early engagement', specifically communicating with all students (not just narrow, targeted groups) at a time when they are preparing for the start of university. The intervention is integrated early and directly into the academic sphere, making its relevance to the incoming student explicitly clear: "*Here are advice, hints and tips from students who were in exactly the same place as you last year and have 'survived' both as a student in xxx subject and got used to living in Manchester.*" At a basic level it addresses key areas of concern and answers those questions most likely to be asked by incoming students, in an informal, student-friendly and accessible way. Considering the intervention in the context of the What Works? programme, pre-arrival guides address, in part, all three spheres of engagement: academic, social and services. In doing so, they equip students (capacity build) to take some responsibility for their progression whilst in a supported environment. The guides also promote a sense of "belonging" to a programme of study (leading, as acknowledged by What Works?, to greater student engagement) and a better understanding of university processes and services, thereby improving the students' knowledge, confidence and identity.

### **Evidence of impact**

Since the initial production of pre-arrival guides in 2001–02, the number of disciplines engaged in producing guides has significantly increased over the years, to 10 disciplines in 2005–06 and 28 disciplines in 2010–11. The increase is due to increased participation in, and awareness of, peer support across the university and the positive impact it has on the students' experience. The increase is a result of the improved communication between peer support schemes through a series of student co-ordinator networking meetings.

This growth of activity shows that the pre-arrival guides are effective and therefore have become an integrated part of the SaP programme. The involvement of a wider range of students and staff demonstrates support for the production of the guides at a school level.



Evaluations of the pre-arrival guides have shown that the students receiving them do read them, appreciate getting them and find them useful in their transition to university. The evaluation of the impact of the pre-arrival guides and their content is primarily conducted in core first-year lectures or through paper-based surveys as part of an evaluation of the peer support scheme as a whole.

Recent data for various schemes provides evidence of what the students like and highlights the benefits of the pre-arrival Guides. Here is a snapshot of the results obtained by the evaluations:

- In Italian Studies 2008–09, 50% of respondents rated the pre-arrival material as good or excellent.
- 75% of respondents felt that it was necessary material for individual and ongoing reference.
- In Politics, Philosophy and Economics in 2008–09, 80% agreed that pre-arrival material was necessary or very necessary.
- For Combined Studies in 2009–10, 88% of respondents said they found it a useful thing to receive before coming to university.
- The students from Audiology in 2009–10 expressed that pre-arrival guides and Welcome Week talks or events are the best ways to let first-year students know about the mentoring scheme.
- 88% of the Manchester Medical School students in 2011–12 rated the pre-arrival guide as “good” or “excellent” and 76% said the guide was helpful.
- Furthermore, 65% of students in the Manchester Medical School 2011–12 said they were made aware of the Peer Mentor scheme through the pre-arrival guide.
- In Psychology 2011–12, 75% said it was “useful” or “extremely useful”.

This snapshot of evaluations across different disciplines and years demonstrates how valued the pre-arrival guides are by the students who receive them and the positive impact they have on the students’ experiences.

The guides are also developing into new areas as some are going online whilst others are being put onto USB sticks, rather than being printed. These developments are due to the changing media used to provide pre-arrival material, produced by staff, to new students. Also, disciplines do not want to lose the impact that the guides provide, therefore they are adapting the guides to suit the new digital environments being offered to new students. The change and growth of these areas demonstrates the success of the pre-arrival guides and how they support students’ needs.

Furthermore, the localised use of students to produce materials is being adopted at an institutional level. The Crucial Guide, one of the institutional guides sent out in the pre-arrival packs, was reviewed in 2010–11 by asking students to be co-consultants on its content and layout. This demonstrates the value that is placed on involving students in the production of guidance materials for other students.

## Conclusion

The guides provide a vast amount of support to new students coming to the university. Written by students who have already been through the transition to university, they allow the incoming students to get a more relatable viewpoint of what it is like and let them know that many of their hopes, apprehensions and expectations are completely normal, therefore making transition easier. Information on budgeting, getting around and living in the city cheaply can help students realise that they need to keep control of their money, with the aim of reducing potential financial difficulties for the students later on, which is one of the reasons why some students choose to drop out.

The guides:

- enable a better understanding of what to expect from a student perspective;
- develop a positive view of their course in knowing that the material has been written specifically for them;
- raise awareness of activities taking place in Welcome Week before arrival.

Furthermore, letting students know that support is available to them and how to access it means they can draw on that support as soon as they need it, which helps reduce the likelihood of withdrawals.

In developing guides, it is important to:

- start small – many guides from the University of Manchester started as a welcome letter;
- involve students from the outset in branding, design and content;
- expect the contents to evolve with the student cohort;
- make sure the material is tailored and owned by the peer support scheme.

## Website

<http://www.manchester.ac.uk/studentsaspartners>

## Using social networking to enable students to engage with the university prior to entry

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### Keywords

- transition
- social networking
- Ning
- induction
- engagement

### Nature of intervention

This learning development unit intervention uses Ning (a social networking platform) as a means of providing social, practical and academic support during students' transition into higher education (HE).

### Focus of intervention

This intervention is aimed at enhancing the student experience and is primarily social as its purpose is to increase student engagement. However, as there is the opportunity to engage with lecturers and resources, there is also an academic element.

### Description of intervention

The Startonline programme, a bespoke social networking site (SNS), forms part of a raft of pre-sessional programmes run by the Learning Development Unit (LDU) that are otherwise campus-based. The success of existing on-site programmes, which are necessarily limited in terms of the number of students who can be accommodated, led staff to consider a flexible resource that would be accessible to a wider range of students, including international students or those who have other commitments.

Because of difficulties in facilitating institutional virtual learning environment (VLE) access for pre-enrolment students, Ning was identified as the platform of choice for this project. Ning is a flexible, easy-to-use online tool that allows the creation of bespoke social networking environments, incorporating video, podcasts, member profiles and instant messaging options, discussion forums and web pages. Initially free, Ning is now subject to a licensing charge (currently just under £400 a year) which was borne by the university in order to make student access free.

In Startonline, Ning was used to provide the following:

- non-subject-specific academic activities – critical thinking, logical reasoning, writing skills;
- social networking tools – profiles, 'friending', messaging and chat;
- practical information, ranging from student services to local entertainment.

Using a bespoke SNS solution rather than building on students' existing online profiles (for example, in Facebook) allowed Startonline to circumvent potential privacy issues identified in other studies (Ribchester, 2009; Sturgeon and Walker, 2009) and gave the students control of the extent to which they could choose to make links between their personal online 'spaces' and their more public university 'faces'. The decision to use Ning was reached following a robust investigation of alternatives and discussion with other universities. Beyond allowing staff and students to manage privacy issues, using Ning has a number of benefits: it is accessible to any student who has access to the Internet; it can be operated on a public or members-only basis; and it is easy to set up and manage for non-technical staff. Ning can also be used to generate income via the creation of paid access areas within a site, although this is not a feature that has been used as part of the Startonline project.

Startonline is facilitated and managed by the LDU, but staff from across the university are encouraged to set up profiles and subject-related 'welcome' pages with a view to engaging directly with students or providing resources for students to engage with prior to entry, supported with training and technical assistance from the LDU. It also relies on the input of existing students, who provide a "real life" view of life at Bucks.

Information about Startonline is distributed alongside joining instructions as well as advertised on the university's online presence. Participation is voluntary, but students who access the site must become "members" in order to access information on all the pages. The site is available to students for one month leading up to induction, when it is effectively "mothballed", with discussion threads and other interactive features closed down.

### How the intervention engages students

Startonline uses social networking affordances to provide students with the opportunity to establish social contact, seek useful practical information, and begin engaging with their subject areas before arrival at the university in induction week. The main benefits to students are consistent with those available to the university's other pre-entry programmes. It encourages early engagement with the university and both anticipates and provides a gentle introduction to the transition process. However, using an online approach also increases flexibility and accessibility. This is particularly important to the approximately 10% of Startonline users who are international students.

### Link to the What Works? findings

The Startonline project embodies what is known about retention in terms of engagement of students within HE and is, therefore, consistent with findings in the What Works? final report: "It is essential that engagement begins early [...] Pre-entry and induction activities should have a range of functions, but in particular they should facilitate students to build social relationships with current and new students and members of staff [...]" (Thomas, 2012, p. 17). Using an SNS facilitates early engagement in a way that is accessible and flexible. This appeals to students who are unable or prefer not to travel to campus-based pre-sessional programmes.

### Evidence of effectiveness/impact

An analysis of Startonline's use demonstrates that the site has been particularly effective in supporting students in two areas: social integration and the management of practicalities.

#### Social integration

Establishing friendships and social networks has been described as key to transition (Lowe and Cooke, 2003; Maunder *et al.*, 2010), providing undergraduates with everything from moral support to more general guidance (Wickens *et al.*, 2006). SNSs are well placed to provide students with opportunities for making contact with each other and are well established as part of students' existing communication systems (Phipps, 2007) and the means with which they maintain their 'social capital' (Ellison *et al.*, 2007). Indeed, it was clear from Startonline activity and from interviewees that students used the technology to lay the groundwork for future university-based relationships:

*"I like how it was set up so that students that were just starting could like get to know people that could be on their course or who they might be living with things like that . . . so that you don't feel too scared or anything when you come in to the Uni thinking 'Oh no I don't know anyone.'" (Excerpt from student interview)*

Statistical data demonstrated that the most popular areas were member profiles and discussion forums. Approximately 60% of discussions in the environment related to finding others who were either studying on the same course or living in or near the same accommodation, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Theme	Threads	Replies	Total (threads and replies)	% of total discussion activity
Social	37	173	210	63
Practical	7	24	31	9
Academic	0	0	0	0

**Figure 1: Summary of student-initiated discussion forum activity (threads and replies)**

Interestingly, there is clear evidence of students establishing initial contact in Startonline and then moving out into the private domain by exchanging profile information and 'friending' each other on Facebook. Similarly, there is also evidence of interest in meeting within the university.

## Managing practicalities

Managing the practicalities of living away from home in an unfamiliar environment and obtaining information related to the university was another focus for student concern. The most popular thread was called “Ask any question”, which enabled students to find out information accordingly. Students were also pro-active in starting their own discussion threads if they needed information. This accounted for 20% of all student-initiated threads. Equally, students seemed content to answer one another, or direct one another to information. In cases where specialised information was needed, the Students Union or the appropriate staff member provided information. These interactions highlight that the students were both interested in practical information and pro-active in obtaining it. Their interactions were guided by personal need and shaped accordingly:

“I’m disabled. So I was a bit unsure about how I was, you know, how I’d go about finding [Disability Services] and what I could do, and what sort of help they’d give [. . .] I did ask a few questions I wasn’t sure about. So, I asked those myself.” (Excerpt from student interview)

No major difficulties were associated with the implementation of the site. However, encouraging staff participation requires consideration. The evaluation highlighted that students are keen to engage with one another and less interested in accessing generic learning activities. Nevertheless, they are eager to engage with their course and seek out information, resources and activities specifically related to their chosen field of study. Direct personal and personable presence of subject-teaching staff members in the environment seems to be central in determining this and provides the basis for potentially powerful opportunities for learning.

## Conclusion

There has been considerable success in using an SNS when the technology is used in a way that ‘plays to its strengths’ (that is, to connect with others and convey information). When the technology was used in line with its affordances in this way, learning opportunities seemed to occur spontaneously. This is in marked contrast to students’ attitudes to and (lack of) use of more generic, ‘impersonal’ learning activities, which were largely ignored. While student problems during first year are often related to a lack of study skills (Winterson and Russ, 2008; Cook and Leckey, 1999), students themselves seem, initially at least, to be far more concerned about establishing social connections, evidently with each other, but also with subject teaching staff.

In contrast, where subject-related teaching staff members were seen to be available, students sought information and engaged with materials in a way that could be usefully built on within the physical teaching environment. This is both apparent in the interest demonstrated by students contacting staff, and as expressed by staff, who note the benefits of engaging with students before their arrival:

“It meant that the first week was a little bit more informed. Rather than just being a lecturer at the front who spoke to a hundred people, I could get in to know a couple of the individuals, which was nice. What I was able to do [knowing that some students had accessed resources] was reference some of that in the conversation, and they would know what I was talking about. And that was very, very useful in terms of that engagement: breaking it down rather than being just a cold lecture [. . .] it became something that was a little bit more vibrant, really.” (Excerpt from staff interview)

It is telling that this learning-related activity took place solely via direct messages to staff profiles, rather than in the public discussion forum, perhaps reflecting Greenhow’s (2009) assessment of the benefits of SNSs to afford useful effective academic behaviour.

HEIs would benefit from the extended provision of opportunities for pre-entry engagement of students afforded by SNSs such as Ning. While students will naturally engage with these resources in a way that promotes social engagement, a real benefit in terms of academic engagement may result from the semi-formal involvement of staff. In order for proper space to be created for such staff–student interactions, it is recommended that training and orientation to social networking affordances be made available.

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# Demystifying university: Using Facebook to develop a pre-induction online community to aid transition and retention

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## Keywords

- transition
- social media
- peer support
- induction
- Facebook
- widening participation

## Nature of intervention

Pre-entry, subject specific, closed Facebook group for the Broadcast Media students at the University of Brighton.

## Focus of intervention

This intervention is both academic and social, aimed at improving the transition experience by using a closed Facebook group to create a pre-induction online social space for new students to meet one another and for student ambassadors to offer peer support and advice. The group provides a forum for staff to offer support and guidance in order to begin the academic transition.

## Description of intervention

A closed Facebook group for the students joining the level 4 Broadcast Media courses at the University of Brighton's Hastings Campus was established in the weeks leading up to enrolment.

The nature of a closed group is that members have to request to join and receive approval from a group administrator. Facebook then allows the members of a closed group to post on the group's wall and to comment on posts made by others and the wall can only be viewed by those who are members of the closed group. A closed group was selected to ensure that the membership was secure and controlled and students and staff were able to post freely in the knowledge that posts could not be viewed by a wider audience. The link and information about the group was provided to the new students in their welcome letters which were sent out in August and September and also via the new students' area of the virtual learning environment (VLE). Course tutors established professional Facebook profiles which only contain academic information, similar to the profiles found on the faculty website; therefore students have no access to personal details. Student ambassadors from Level 5 and Level 6 were invited to participate in the group to establish pre-induction connections with the new students and offer peer-to-peer support and advice.

Initially the lead tutor was answering questions and posting information but as the group gained momentum the pre-induction support was shared with student ambassadors, support staff, technicians, the widening participation co-ordinator, the marketing officer, student services staff and other members of the course team, all (except the student ambassadors) with professional Facebook profiles. The ambassadors were able to answer questions which were outside of the experience of the tutors, such as what to bring to halls of residence and the experience of Freshers Week from a student perspective. Queries posted on the wall that required attention by a particular group member could be "tagged: by name so that the appropriate person's attention was drawn to the post and an answer given quickly. This was especially effective when the tutors felt that ambassadors were better placed to answer the query.

It also gave the staff a forum to disseminate institutional pre-induction information, to enhance the course information available on the university's website and to create a "buzz" about Freshers Week, the course and starting university. Academic staff also started the formative steps towards academic engagement with the courses by posting useful online material to read, watch and listen to prior to the course starting. The group was also used by students to form flat-share groups and to arrange to meet at the house-hunting event. Once induction week had started more students joined the group and it became the central sign-posting point for the induction week timetable as it was too soon for students to have access to the VLE or

university email accounts. The group was also used as a tool to run course-related induction week activities and for the Student Union societies to make contact with the new students.

As the teaching term began, students continued to use the group, asking for assistance from Level 5 and Level 6 students, and tutors and staff used it as an informal medium to disseminate information or point to information available on the VLE. It was also used as a student-to-student message board. University and local events were advertised within the group, as were work experience and volunteering opportunities. Course-related links were also posted by staff and students to share.

It was important initially to set the tone of the group and establish a language. Although the language used was less formal than an email with the absence of 'dear' and 'from' it was more formal than the abbreviations and SMS language used by some consumers on Facebook, which made the group posts accessible to students whose first language wasn't English. A level of respect and politeness was achieved but the tone remained fun, friendly and open. Although ready to 'police' the group, tutors did not experience any concerning behaviour or language.

### **How the intervention engages students**

This early intervention is designed to provide a pre-induction communication method which is not available to either the new students or the tutors by any other means at this stage of a students' transition to higher education. The group offers access to student ambassadors which would be unlikely to occur until at least induction week without the means of the Facebook group. Essentially the group provides an informal environment for new students to ask questions, receive reassurance and build anticipation of the university experience by using a familiar communication medium prior to starting higher education. The FdA Broadcast Media Programme at the Hastings Campus attracts many students from widening participation backgrounds, many of whom enter the university with a Level 3 further education (FE) qualification. Existing research shows that there is a correlation between levels of academic preparedness and prior engagement with university (Thomas and Yorke, 2003) with non-traditional students from vocational FE courses having more issues surrounding preparedness than those following an 'A' level route (Hatt and Baxter, 2003). Widening participation and pre-entry interventions raised confidence levels, demystified university and contributed to improving retention and success (Thomas and Yorke, 2003; Passy and Morris, 2010; Thomas, 2011). The Facebook group was formed fundamentally to demystify university and prevent the feelings of bewilderment experienced by some non-traditional students in their first semester and to provide:

- a familiar environment in which to form virtual social networks;
- the opportunity to make friends before the start of induction week;
- the opportunity to meet, virtually, other students moving into halls of residence;
- the opportunity to form relationships with tutors before enrolment;
- an environment in which to receive pre-induction peer-to-peer advice from student ambassadors;
- the opportunity to ask tutors and ambassadors questions.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

The intervention in this case study clearly links to and supports the findings of the What Works? study as pre-entry is a key focus of the findings. The Facebook group creates an opportunity in the pre-entry period for "supportive peer relationships" to develop, "meaningful interactions between staff and students" to begin and the "knowledge (and) confidence [. . .] of the learner" to increase in a familiar online environment (Thomas, 2012: 14). Without the presence of the Facebook Group, new students would find it difficult in the time prior to enrolment to communicate with one another, the student ambassadors, the support staff and the academic teaching team, or to learn more about the course and the campus.

This intervention can be considered effective as it encourages and promotes:

*"social interaction with peers and current students and engagement with staff from academic departments and professional services, providing information, informing expectations, building social capital (links with peers, current students and staff) and nurturing a sense of belonging."* (Thomas, 2012: 22)

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

The Facebook group intervention was evaluated using an online survey and staff observations of the group's activity.

Data reveals that 57% of group members added new friends in the pre-induction period in order to develop pre-induction friendships virtually through private messaging or interaction on their own 'walls'. The group's wall posts became very long threads with 78% of the students posting questions and 71% commenting on other students' posts. Staff observed students chatting informally on the wall about their expectations and excitement about starting the courses. When asked in the survey about the benefits to joining the group, one Level 4 student stated:

*"It got me into the spirit and made me feel less nervous about coming to university."*

Several students expressed nervousness and shyness in their posts about meeting new people. These concerns were responded to positively by other students and in particular by the ambassadors. Staff observed that the students arranged to

meet one another in person prior to coming to the campus on enrolment day, so anxious students weren't alone and a caring community beyond the virtual emerged. Through the tone and language used in the group, students were made to feel they could ask anything on the wall.

*"I worry about a lot of stupid little things, and having the group there just meant that I could leave a short message that didn't take up too much time to be answered [ . . . ] staff encouraged people to ask questions that seem stupid".* (Level 4 student)

Students appreciated the response time to questions which were posted on the group's wall, as there were many tutors, support staff and ambassadors in the group, meaning new students didn't have to wait for one individual to respond as you would with email correspondence:

*"It has been good because the replies are always fast. I can't think of anything bad about it and I would encourage Freshers next year to use it."* (Level 4 student)

Once the teaching term began several students who were repeatedly absent became a cause for concern as they had not responded to emails from the course leader or letters from student services. These students were contacted via the private messaging facility on Facebook by the course leader (as the students were group members this was possible) and the students responded immediately and were then referred to student services for transition support.

Although the group was set up as a pre-induction intervention it kept running all year with students using it to ask questions and communicate with staff. One student commented that:

*"It is a comfort to know that you can ask for help, and usually get an answer by the next day without having to worry about tracking lecturers down or seeing them in their office times."* (Level 4 student)

During assessment periods, ambassadors wrote motivational posts and staff observed attendance increase at less popular modules following these comments. Staff posted information about how to access study skills and IT assistance. Students also commented in the survey that they used the group as a repository for information as they could look on the group wall and find the information they needed as in all likelihood someone else had already asked the question.

## Conclusion

The use of the Facebook group had many positive features. However, the overriding benefit is the communication between new students and student ambassadors and the opportunity to create a supportive network in the pre-entry phase of transition. Additionally, the ability to communicate with students through the private messaging facility has proved invaluable. Without this communication method these students would have been difficult to re-engage. The students who were contacted in this way were grateful and felt that they were cared about as the message came through Facebook.

## Recommendation for practice

The following are helpful tips when considering setting up academic Facebook groups:

- establish professional Facebook profiles;
- create a set of guidelines for Student Ambassadors so they know their boundaries and they are able to signpost students to the right member of staff to deal with a query;
- ensure sufficient numbers of staff are group members to share the workload, provide timely responses and regularly keep watch over the group;
- provide the group with a set of guidelines to prevent inappropriate posts. This will prevent students from making post which are not relevant to the nature of the group.

Following this pilot Facebook group, the University of Brighton has established Social Media Student Ambassadors and closed groups for each campus on Facebook in order to engage with a greater number of students in the pre-entry phase.

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## Study Skills Summer School: Preparing for higher education

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### Keywords

- transition
- pre-entry
- skills
- academic
- social
- integration

### Nature of intervention

The Study Skills Summer School, which prepares students for higher education, is organised and delivered by Student Support Services at the University of Hull (UoH) and open to all faculties.

### Focus of intervention

The Summer School focuses on academic, social and professional (transferable skills) development, and aims at both enhancing the student experience and improving practice.

### Description of intervention

Whilst predominantly focusing upon academic skills development, the UoH Summer School also contains a significant social element that actively encourages potential and continuing students to mix, make connections and ‘get to know faces’ with their peers and staff members before the registration period, while providing an ‘authentic’ university learning experience. Moreover, the early development of practical academic study skills feeds into the marketplace demand for graduates able to demonstrate and apply strong transferable skills for professional practice, alongside Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) guidelines (Dawson *et al.* 2006: 20–43; Purcell *et al.* 2005: 6; Rees *et al.* 2007: 127).

Held in July/August each year, the Summer School is a two-day, non-residential event with 80 places, particularly targeting non-traditional students (for example, mature or part-time students) who are either considering or continuing a degree programme at the UoH. Consisting of a mix of lectures, workshops/seminars, group discussions and reflective written work, the Summer School provides teaching and learning opportunities in particular academic/study and transferable skills. While developing the taught sessions in response to student feedback, the core subjects include reading techniques, note-taking, essay planning and writing, referencing and proof-reading, alongside general skills in time management, self-direction, and critical and analytical thinking. Thus, the Summer School focuses on the introduction and development of various core study and transferable skills, with its syllabus meeting university module board approval. Moreover, the Summer School also performs the functions of providing attendees with a ‘real’ university experience, an introduction to the structures of higher education (HE) delivery, alongside a space in which to form new bonds and develop social relations with potential peers. Through the incorporation of group work and social situations, the Summer School enables the ‘socialisation’ of students within the setting of academic development, wherein the first instances of camaraderie may form through a sense of, as one student expressed it, “not being the only one” (female).

The structure of the Summer School is comparable to those of many short and/or intensive courses found throughout education. Following a collective welcome and introductory session, students form pre-allocated groups of up to 20, with whom they will work throughout the majority of the two days, attending the same classes together. There are four taught sessions each day, each between 75 and 90 minutes in length, with refreshment breaks and catered buffet lunches punctuating classes. By teaching sessions in parallel, while mirroring (that is, two ‘identical’ sessions running simultaneously) and repeating classes with other groups over the two days, all groups receive the core curriculum and grounding in each of the subjects. For example, in the first morning while groups 1 and 2 take sessions A and then B, groups 3 and 4 cover sessions C and D; in the afternoon sessions, groups 1 and 2 then take the path groups 3 and 4 covered in the morning, and *vice versa*. By replicating this system on the second day, all groups follow the eight Summer School sessions.

The sessions themselves combine traditional lecture delivery with seminar/workshop-style group-based tasks and discussion, with students evidencing outcomes through reflective journals and their personal development from an initial skills audit. The structure of the initial audit and reflective journal draw upon established work by Cottrell (2003), with the taught sessions developing content from this and various other sources, many of which are readily available on the UoH's website (for example, Study Advice Service 2012). Although the sessions tend to be longer than normal timetabled classes (50 minutes), and the Summer School more intensive than an average student schedule, the content is indicative of level 4 study and the different pedagogical strategies within HE. Nevertheless, despite differences in delivery and style, tutors tend to collaborate on developing the content of mirrored parallel sessions while using examples and ideas that reflect their own academic interests and disciplines, which ensures that students all cover the same ground while providing a strong connection between academic/study-skills and knowledge production.

### How the intervention engages students

The Summer School engages students in three distinct but interrelated ways:

- Through academic and/or informative taught content formalising necessary skills.
- Through delivering an 'authentic university experience'.
- Through the promotion of, and encouragement toward, building social bonds.

In keeping with its teaching and learning aims, the Summer School has documented and assessable module aims, learning outcomes, assessment, and teaching and learning strategies, within the framework of the overall UFA framework. These provide Summer School students with clear aims and outcomes within the taught syllabus, while conforming to norms within the institution. Moreover, the use of group work introduces students to the often-discursive debate that encourages both knowledge production and the development of understanding, while integrating social elements into studies. Therefore, while the Summer School bases itself within the realm of teaching and learning provision, it also introduces new, non-traditional students to HE delivery through direct experience. This shared experience in the classroom continues throughout the Summer School with the promotion of social interaction between students during the refreshment breaks and catered lunches.

### Link to the What Works? findings

While this intervention was part of the evidence base for the What Works? Student Retention and Success programme, the Summer School's links to the connected areas of 'belonging' and 'engagement' brought out across the projects bears reinforcement (Boyle *et al.*, 2011; Thomas, 2012). For Thomas (2012), the interplay between belonging and engagement is critical, in the sense that students can build belonging through connections with individuals and the intertwining of their own *habitus* with that of the institution, yet the institution must provide opportunities for engagement to nurture, promote and facilitate belonging, both academically and socially (2012: 12–15). In order to achieve this, Thomas identifies four key aspects to consider: "supportive **peer relations**; meaningful **interaction between staff and students**; developing **knowledge, confidence and identity** as successful HE learners; [and] an HE experience that is **relevant to interests and future goals**" (2012: 14–15). Moreover, engagement through the Summer School is both early and continuing; being available to pre-entry students and already registered non-traditional students. In addition, the students are engaged through the academic sphere, via teaching and learning techniques, while developing students' capacity to engage with their academic studies and social relationships, which is much of what the What Works? model embodies, both in spirit and reality (see Thomas 2012: 16–17).

### Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Student responses to the Summer School are overwhelmingly positive, and indicate the importance and impact of integrating social elements within an academic framework. For mature and part-time pre-entry students in particular, the opportunity to sample academic delivery and engage in HE learning are of the utmost importance, but the significance of social relations are initially often underplayed. Numerous respondents propose that they "already have full lives" (male), are "only interested in studying" (female) and "don't need more friends" (female). Yet the integration of the academic and social spheres through the process of working together, of sharing the experience and of interacting in social spaces has a marked effect upon attendees, with representative comments stating:

*"It made me feel like a student!"*

*"I am much more confident and less afraid."*

*"It meant I knew people, I had people to talk to when we started [. . .]  
We had a connection [. . .] and I knew what to do."*

One student neatly sums up the rationale of the Summer School in reflection of his or her own experience:

*“Meeting other mature students and getting a feeling for the university. Meeting other staff, and being in a learning environment and finding out what to expect going forward.”*

These responses suggest the Summer School plays a strong role in providing mature and part-time students with a sense of what Giddens (1991) refers to as ‘ontological security’. As such, the Summer School smoothes out the uncertainties from the unfamiliar and daunting structures of HE and study at degree level that often trouble non-traditional students by placing it within ongoing narratives: “I can see myself being a student now, it makes sense” (male), and the collective experience of “not being the only one” (female).

Continuing students tend to make up between 10% and 20% of the total attendees, and there is no clear quantitative data to suggest a causal reason. However, qualitative research uncovered two distinct student narratives. In the first, where the move from part- to full-time study is seen as daunting, there is a distinct need to “improve, get better . . . [as full-time study is] more serious” (female). The second includes students who are less confident about their existing skills, with some seeking to “brush up” (male, mature, part-time) in areas they feel are lacking, while others seek to gain confirmation that they are “getting it right” (female, mature, full-time). On occasion, a minority of these students elect not to complete the module as they find their existing skills base exceeds their expectations of the Summer School, and these respondents indicate they leave the course early because “we already know this . . .” (female), which while negative also demonstrates a validation of their knowledge: “. . . but, it’s good to know we’re getting it right” (female).

Whilst not every attendee subsequently registers with the university, a quantitative analysis finds post-Summer School registration/continuation rates of 84% and 85% in the academic years 2009–10 and 2010–11, respectively. This figure increases to 96% in academic year 2011–12, which while a distinct improvement may be influenced by the increase in student-owed fees beginning in 2012–13. Nevertheless, over the three academic years 2007–08 to 2009–10, the retention rate of new students who attend the Summer School and subsequently register ranges between 94% and 96%. These figures are substantially higher than the retention rate for mature students of either the UoH (between 86% and 88%, rounded) or HE in England (85% to 87%, rounded) over the same period (HESA, 2012a). This suggests an impact whereby the rates of continuation in mature and part-time students who have completed the Summer School are more in line with the sector-wide HESA statistics for full-time traditional-age students, which hovers around the 93% mark and has done year on year since 1997–98 (HESA, 2012b).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the available data suggests the Summer School is an effective tool in preparing non-traditional students for success in HE through the three aspects of academic delivery and formalising necessary, transferable skills; introducing an authentic classroom experience; and providing a mediated social space. Nevertheless, there is one recurring issue to consider: limited numbers have (inevitably, perhaps) led to over-subscription, with some potential attendees left disappointed. Continuing students deciding to leave early because they are already on a level with the material, and/or a small but steady run of non-attendance on the day can exacerbate this issue. In combating this, colleagues adapting the Summer School for other institutions might consider the following:

- other provision for continuing students;
- a ‘last-minute’ list to fill spaces left unattended.

This is not something to be tackled by further screening techniques for those pre-entry students who most need ‘skills development’, or by excluding continuing non-traditional students from shared experiences beyond their department or faculty. If anything, experience with non-traditional students demonstrates that confidence and security through camaraderie are as important as academic input but they are most effective when packaged within the academic experience, and this is the nexus between belonging and engagement (Boyle *et al.*, 2011; Thomas 2012). If we equate student success with student retention, the evidence suggests that the Summer School does this. Yet this paper contends that the Summer School promotes *belonging* through *engagement*, and goes *beyond* the short-termism of retention. Thus, more detailed, longitudinal work is necessary to provide conclusive evidence that attendees go on to complete their chosen programme of study, which in light of the What Works? project would seem to be a better indicator of success.

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# Brunel University Headstart week – an introduction to university life and learning

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## Keywords

- pre-induction
- transition
- widening participation
- student experience/engagement
- orientation
- retention

## Nature of intervention

Headstart week is an optional pre-session programme for widening participation students about to enter university. The week includes academic skills workshops, presentations and social activities, introducing students to university life and learning and is held the week before induction week.

## Description of intervention

Research corroborates that students' preparedness for higher education has an impact on their retention and success and, subsequently, that pre-entry information and a focus on early yet extended induction has a positive impact (Yorke and Longden, 2008; Harvey and Drew, 2006). Therefore, the aim of Headstart week is to introduce underrepresented students to university life and learning through a week of academic skills workshops, social activities with current undergraduates and group work held the week before induction week. The wider purpose is that in doing so, it ensures successful transition into university and ultimately retention and success in higher education (Crooks, 2011). The programme is delivered in collaboration between Widening Participation (WP) and the Academic Skills (ASK) department. ASK delivers the majority of academic skills workshops, while WP provides funding, overall management and a team of student ambassadors.

Headstart week has been running at Brunel since 2009 and is open to home-based undergraduate students that meet Brunel's Widening Participation targeted groups criteria:

- students studying vocational qualifications;
- students from low-participation neighbourhoods;
- care leavers;
- people with disabilities;
- mature (over 21).

Priority is given to students who live in the six West London boroughs where the university operates its Widening Participation strategy. Participants are invited in early July from those who have accepted unconditional firm offers and then a second round are invited after the A-level results released in mid-August. Invites are sent via email, and registration is on a first come, first served basis, for approximately 70 places. Students attend from a wide range of courses across Brunel and are allocated to groups with students studying similar subjects alongside a current student ambassador with relevant subject expertise. Twenty places are reserved for students studying BSc Occupational Therapy (OT). This is because lecturers in the OT department recognised a need to prepare students who have gained the Access entry qualification, for the scientific demands of the course, particularly the physiology element. To this end, they have worked closely with the Headstart team to design and deliver subject-specific sessions throughout the week for the OT students.

The Headstart timetable is designed to reflect university learning and teaching. For example, it is delivered via large group lectures, small seminars, group work and one-to-one tutorials. In one session, students are given the opportunity to write and submit 500 words to discuss with a member of academic staff, thus replicating both the personal tutor relationship and the style of feedback given in higher education. Another session, Introduction to Seminars, breaks students into small groups to formulate questions on university life and learning and put them to a group of experienced WP student ambassadors in a 'Question Time' panel. Furthermore, to introduce the concept of independent learning, students work in small project groups, supported by an ambassador, to research and deliver a presentation on set topics, for example 'support for students' or 'sports and societies', for feedback from academic staff and students.

The majority of the week consists of academic skills workshops, preparing students for key aspects of university study. Workshops on 'time management' provide opportunities to talk about how to stay motivated when working independently and 'academic writing' discusses why university-level writing requires rigorous research and referencing. Fundamentally, the timetable is flexible, with overlapping and repeated sessions and requires students to make choices from day two as to which sessions they will attend. On the afternoon of day three, for example, they have the choice of attending a workshop, arranging a meeting with a personal tutor or spending time on research for the group project. Adapting to choice is an important transition within higher education and so it is important to set this expectation early, during this week.

Harvey and Drew (2006) highlight the importance of social integration as part of the transition to higher education so social and practical concerns were recognised in the design of the programme. The sessions 'Understanding your Timetable', 'Handling Pressure' and 'Money Management' were positively received, as was an inspiring session on the benefits of a positive mental attitude delivered by a motivational speaker. Furthermore, all sessions were designed to be interactive to give students the opportunity to talk to each other as much as possible. Students were encouraged to start the day and take breaks and lunch together, as well as to work closely in their small groups, leading towards the group project. Rock climbing provided a further opportunity for more informal social interaction.

### **How the intervention engages students**

Headstart week has several positive outcomes for the participants:

- The workshop series and the format of the week develop the necessary academic skills of students to increase their preparedness for academic study. A 2011 student evaluation stated *"the course made me understand more on what to expect when I start my university studies"*. However, while this week can only offer an introduction to these topics it can at least highlight the importance of developing academic skills at an early stage and of the need for students to access support if and when required. Another 2011 student evaluation stated *"I need to address my severe lack of maths experience ASAP – and I'm on the case. There here are bound to be gaps in my education that I need to address and I know that there is help for me should I require it – which I will"*.
- The range of speakers introduces students to key university services. ASK continues to see these students throughout their time at Brunel and this sense of continuity has a positive impact on these students' feelings about transition and belonging. A student evaluation from 2011 stated *"I now know what is available/where things are located. This takes away A LOT of stress before fresher's week – it's confidence building"*.
- The notions of confidence and belonging are key themes in student evaluations and the week has a part to play in supporting social transition, as well as academic. A 2010 student evaluation focused on personal interaction during the week, stating *"Contact time with tutors/current students/various members of staff is very helpful. I feel more confident about attending university and have also made great friends already"*. Students left the week having formed bonds with peers and staff, as well as being familiar with the social and academic environments of the university. In doing this, the week helped to foster their sense of belonging to the Headstart group and to the university.
- The group was supported throughout the week using our dedicated team of student ambassadors, the majority of whom were former Headstart-ers themselves. This very much forms part of the 'life cycle' of Headstart and all of the 2011 new student ambassadors were drawn from this year's Headstart group. In addition, these students become ambassador for the services they are introduced to during this week, such as ASK, encouraging their fellow students to attend. We interviewed a student from the 2010 cohort who said *"I should have had an ASK t-shirt. Well, a lot of the time when I got an A, I would say, well I got feedback from ASK and they'll be like 'Who? What?'"*
- The student ambassadors recruited to assist throughout the week are considered an essential element of the programme as they provide the new students with information and advice from a students' perspective. The ambassadors are seen as key members of the Headstart event and are required to attend a meeting each morning with the Headstart team before the students arrive to share information and concerns. They also bring fresh ideas including setting up a Facebook group to provide another environment in which the Headstart students may communicate. This is now used as a space for students to discuss ideas, share resources and make friends – all administered by the student ambassadors.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

The week has had a demonstrable impact upon retention and attainment. However, as there was no planned control group, figures for the Headstart week participants have been compared with those who were invited (and therefore are from a comparable WP background) and who did not attend. There is an obvious caveat here that those who decide to make the decision to attend this pre-sessional event show an enthusiasm and dedication that may make them more likely to succeed in higher education regardless of this intervention. Despite this, the impact of the week on WP students is clear.

Of the 2009 cohort (46) who attended Headstart week, 17% left their courses before completion, therefore 83% were retained. However, 42% of those who were invited to Headstart but did not attend left their courses before completion. A

similar trend appears in subsequent years. Of the 2010 cohort (63) who attended Headstart week, to date 21% have left their courses before completion; therefore 79% have been retained. However of those who were invited to Headstart but who did not attend, to date 36% have left their courses. Initial data suggests that Headstart has an impact on attainment as well as retention. Of the 18 who graduated after three years of study, 28% gained a first-class honours degree.

Given the positive outcomes and the relatively low running costs, the project represented an innovative and cost-effective way of enhancing the student experience at Brunel.

The WP team at Brunel has long advocated that its work is about access and success. The HE sector as a whole has a duty of care to ensure that adequate and appropriate support is in place to enhance successful transition into, and progression through, university.

In order to ensure that students were not deterred from attending due to the cost of travelling, all travel costs were reimbursed in full. With some students travelling for four hours and in excess of sixty miles to attend, it was important that we did this. An analysis of the 2012 cohort revealed that, although most of the students who attended would have done so had there been no financial reimbursement, 32% stated that they simply could not have afforded to. As a direct result of attending the week, many found cheaper ways of travelling and shorter routes while others decided during the pre-sessional week to apply for accommodation on campus.

Students made a number of other sacrifices to attend this week which help to paint a richer picture of the WP cohort. In 2012, 18% of students resigned from their job a week early in order to attend and 25% had to make alternative provisions for childcare, for example making additional payments for breakfast and after-school clubs.

## Conclusion

An evaluation report of the Headstart programme from Occupational Therapy (OT) students' perspectives demonstrated clearly that all students valued the programme as it "*provided a positive and good foundation on which to build their university life*". The week has been adopted by the OT staff in the School of Health Sciences and Social Care to ensure that students start their undergraduate studies with the required level of physiology. The findings also suggest that the week helped to develop good academic and time-management skills, supported engagement with the university and facilitated knowledge and understanding. The Headstart programme has extended the university's concept of induction to include pre-entry events, a view supported by Tinto (2008) who states that access without support is not opportunity.

Pre-sessional activities such as Headstart that focus on preparation and integration undoubtedly help students entering university for the first time. The message to the sector is clear: a small investment from the outset can help to reap rewards by retaining more students and improves their experience at university. Finally, it is hoped that programmes like this will cease to be the exception and become the norm.

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# Supporting the transition of foundation degree students from levels 4 to 5

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## Keywords

- transition
- FE/HE interface
- progression
- retention
- support
- belonging

## Nature of intervention

Foundation degree students experience a study day the aim of which is to assist their transition from level 4 study, delivered within a further education environment, to level 5 which is delivered in a higher education setting.

## Focus of intervention

The aim of the day is to encourage a feeling of identity within the students, allay the fears and anxieties of those transferring to a higher education environment and prepare them for academic writing at level 5.

## Description of intervention

The majority of foundation degree (FD) students come from backgrounds where higher education (HE) was not an expectation. These students require a flexible approach in order to achieve success, otherwise student engagement and retention can incur a risk to the individual programme and the institution (Rowley, 2005). Although well motivated, FD students, due to their non-traditional educational backgrounds, can be low in confidence (Tierney and Slack, 2005, Thurgate *et al.*, 2007), especially regarding academic skills (Turner *et al.*, 2009, Woolhouse *et al.*, 2009). Schofield and Dismore (2010) agree with Rowley (2005) about the need for universities to be mindful of the pressures this particular group of students faces, therefore requiring a flexible approach to transition. Inadequate provision of student support can have a huge impact on quality risks and student satisfaction (Rowley, 2005; Bridge *et al.*, 2003). This particular group of students values supportive, responsive and available tutors to enhance its progression (Tierney and Slack, 2005). The foundation degree in Integrated Practice (FDIP) is delivered at Edge Hill University (EHU) and two partner FE colleges. One partner college delivers only the first year of the programme; those students then join the EHU group for the second year.

It was quickly established via initial student interviews by the EHU programme leader, module evaluations (ME) and student/staff consultative forums (SSCF) that the partner college students joining EHU for the second year felt 'scared', 'disadvantaged' and 'out of their comfort zone'. Some felt that the sometimes prescriptive and directive, supportive and nurturing approach of the FE college had not prepared them for the independent learning expected in the HE environment. They also stated that they did not 'feel' like a university student, partly because of spending their first year in the FE college and partly because they were only actually in university for one day per week. Bliuc *et al.* (2011) reflect the findings of Thomas (2002) and discuss the importance of nurturing a sense of identity and how this can link to deep approaches to learning and student success. The importance of developing this sense of belonging is stressed in the What Works? publication of 2012.

## How the intervention engages students

In order to try to enhance this sense of identity and belonging, increase academic confidence and student satisfaction and allay anxiety regarding the next level of academic writing (from 4 to 5) and thus, ultimately, ease transition, all FDIP students were invited to a Transition Day in early June 2010. Content was decided upon by analysing the perceived barriers students had discussed verbally, or documented in ME and SSCFs.

Sessions included a welcome from the head of the Applied Health and Social Care Team, and information sessions from the Student Union, Finance and Learning Services. Also included was a practical session on writing at level 5 which discussed expectations and gave the students the opportunity to 'mark' and critique assignments and further practise referencing.

The day evaluated extremely well. Some students had no idea what the Student Union (SU) or Learning Services (LS) could do for them:

*"Thought it was only for students at the Edge Hill Campus."* (SU)

*"Extremely informative, I didn't realise that these services were available."* (LS)

The finance session discussed what was available and how this could be accessed and it was apparent from the questioning and subsequent requests for appointments that a lot of the students were not receiving the correct financial packages:

*"Understood that I was entitled to more than I thought I was . . . Student England Finance aren't always correct!"* (Finance)

We were also able to explore some common misconceptions regarding academic writing, give the students some practical examples and prepare them for the challenges of writing at level 5. This session also provided a forum where they might share anxieties and recognise the commonalities regarding insecurities that students experience when writing academically:

*"Lots of information about how to provide a good structured assignment and I understood more about referencing."*

*"Helped me in ensuring I proof read my work so that I can get higher marks. The referencing activities were very helpful."*

### **Links to the What Works? findings**

The What Works? publication of 2012 discussed at length the requirement for students to have a sense of "belonging" and how this should be encouraged and fostered by institutions. This intervention, based on the qualitative evidence collected, appears to have enhanced the transitional student experience as intended.

#### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

Although it cannot be proven that the introduction of the Transition Day has improved student retention, impacted on academic ability or fostered a sense of identity, qualitative anecdotal evidence from evaluation forms distributed at the end of the day suggests that this student-focused activity has met its proposed aims. Evaluation was overwhelmingly positive with the students reporting increased confidence, and that they were more relaxed and better prepared regarding level 5 expectations:

*"Very informative and interesting day."*

*"I was very informed throughout the day and was reassured about starting my second year"*

*"Overall, I have enjoyed the day and feel more comfortable and supported moving from FE to the Edge Hill Campus."*

Verbal feedback included students saying that they felt more a part of the Edge Hill experience. Even finding out about the student discount card and where they could buy an EHU sweatshirt helped them form a student identity and enhanced the feeling of inclusivity.

Those students studying at partner colleges commented that they found the experience of attending a 'formal' teaching session at the university to be a positive one that increased confidence and had enhanced aspiration. A number of them expressed that they would now consider coming to the university for their top-up year, rather than either not continuing to level 6 or 'making do' with what was available at a local level.

The information we obtained from feedback regarding the Transition Day has also been cascaded to those departments who provided input to the day and thus again improved student experience overall.

Minor amendments have been made regarding the focus of some of the academic activities in the study skills module. An enhanced focus on the improvement of basic academic writing skills such as referencing and paraphrasing has been introduced, as this is what the students felt they needed the most support in.

It was recognised by the finance team that students who spend the majority of their time at partner colleges can also be disadvantaged from a financial perspective. This appeared to be largely due to the lack of specialist knowledge regarding the complications of student finance, especially in view of the diversity of the student body. As a response to this, the finance team has been carrying out workshops in partner colleges to provide staff with some important basic information regarding finances and this has the added advantage of raising awareness about their role and the opportunity to be used as a knowledge resource.

As a team, we have been able to feed back to programme leaders at partner colleges regarding the impact of not recognising the differences in HE students studying in an FE environment and how independent learning needs to be encouraged and supported to prepare the students for the rigours of HE (McCune *et al.* , 2010).

## Conclusion

It is well documented that students in transition from FE to the HE environment may experience difficulties during this period. Therefore, HE institutions should be proactive and reactive regarding their student body and strive to include strategies that support inclusivity and a sense of identity and belonging.

They should provide students with a forum where they may express their concerns in an informal and supportive format. Liaison tutors at this university hold twice-yearly Student Staff Consultative Forums with students at individual partner colleges. The minutes of these meetings feed into a yearly Programme Board. This enables identification and, more importantly, action regarding common themes and concerns that could have an impact on student experience, irrespective of place of study.

Liaison between HE and FE partners should be robust and regular in order to ensure that students are aware of the additional support that is available to them in the HE environment, especially when taking part in a programme delivered in an FE college. Both FE and HE staff need to ensure that they address student misconceptions regarding the perceived barriers to HE.

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# Facilitating transition from further to higher education to improve retention: A first year tutor system

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## Keywords

- transition
- support
- retention
- induction
- orientation
- monitoring

## Nature of intervention

First Year Tutor role for the Institute of Humanities and Creative Arts (IHCA) at the University of Worcester, providing immediate bespoke student support which is both interventionist and elective.

## Focus of intervention

The intervention is aimed at supporting students' social and academic transition into higher education to enhance the student experience and improve retention.

## Description of intervention

An academic tutoring system already exists at the University of Worcester in which students are pre-assigned an Academic Tutor when they arrive and are expected to meet with them four times a year, when skills, employability and reflective practice are discussed. The role of an Academic Tutor is vitally important, which is asserted by Jacui McCary *et al.* (2011), however as it usually sits within higher education (HE), new students are often not aware of the purpose of such a role. In addition, students worry about contacting their Academic Tutors because they are also their subject tutors and students therefore often engage in a kind of presentation management with them, where they present a front-stage performance, as theorised by Goffman (1971), of an 'ideal student' without any difficulties. The result, therefore, is that students do not always engage fully with the support offered by the Academic Tutor system.

The First Year Tutor role was created as an interventionist role intended to improve lines of communication with students in order to enhance student satisfaction and retention. The role evolved to be more informal and pastoral in nature, to increase the availability of support for students, to help them navigate the university systems, to engage them more directly with the university and to help them make the transition from further education (FE) to HE. The role was underpinned by the belief that real access to higher education is only truly achieved when the student can fully access university systems and staff, and thus gain confidence, a sense of cultural belonging (Cashmore *et al.*, 2012) and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). A strong emphasis was also placed on the perception that they would not be judged.

The First Year Tutors are former students who have gone through the University of Worcester system but also have experience of teaching at the university. They occupy a liminal position that is between student and staff and are thus seen to be more impartial and have the ability to mediate between students and staff.

First Year Tutors are present at induction sessions and welcome parties to facilitate social integration and provide recognisable, friendly faces as sources of support ("humanising humanities support"). Students entering their first year complete a questionnaire during their induction. This asks students about their academic preparedness and previous qualifications, their anxieties, what they are most looking forward to and any career ideas or ambitions.

The First Year Tutor system widens the availability window as academic tutors are not always available. Greater availability is achieved through a daily two-hour drop-in session and a dedicated email address which, crucially, guarantees a response within 24 hours. The First Year Tutors direct students to appropriate support services offered both internally and externally to the university. First Year Tutors have the contacts and knowledge to be able to navigate and support students through multiple systems and processes to ensure issues, which are often complex and multifaceted, are resolved, and follow up the referrals.

Links are made with staff to support this through teaching and learning committees and events, staff meetings, themed staff discussions and individual consultations.

First Year Tutors record and monitor student attendance to identify students experiencing difficulties and/or at risk of withdrawal. An automatic email is sent after students have missed two sessions. The email signposts support systems and encourages students to take responsibility for their attendance record, be reflective about their attendance and impact on their studies, and to develop workplace practice and self-management skills. Students who miss further sessions are contacted again by email using a more personal approach to offer support and their attendance is drawn to the attention of both the course and division leaders as well as the module leader.

Strategic emails are sent out before assessment weeks. For example, First Year Tutors email students to remind them about mitigating circumstances, study skills workshops, support systems such as tutors and the writer in residence, and the processes of submitting work.

A range of media was used to communicate with students, which included an easy-to remember email address (ihcafirstyeartutors@worc.ac.uk) and an online presence through Twitter (@IHCA1stYrTutor) and Facebook (IHCA First Years). These sites were also used to give information prior to students attending university such as who the First Year Tutors are, their email addresses, and a place where students could ask questions.

### **How the intervention engages students**

The First Year Tutors engage with students via both intervention and the provision of optional but immediate support.

First Year Tutors attend induction sessions to welcome and approach students in an informal setting, in which they collect induction questionnaires. The results are collated and passed on to students' Academic Tutors. The final question asks whether there is anything they want to ask urgently. Answers given are followed up by First Year Tutors. Students are individually emailed and an FAQ sheet is circulated to all.

Student engagement is aided by a guaranteed email response within 24 hours, including weekends and holidays, to maintain university contact with students at crisis point. The daily two-hour drop-in sessions also ensure students can engage more freely and easily with support.

Appearances in lectures and strategic emailing at danger points, including those resulting from attendance monitoring, foster a culture of self-management and desire for early resolution of problems.

Academic staff advertise the First Year Tutors and either refer students or flag up students potentially at risk from withdrawal for First Year Tutors to contact. The First Year Tutors also encourage students to engage with their Academic Tutors.

The online presence means information is more accessible and more inclusive, and ensures communication with students occurs pre-entry and through their first year.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

A significant number of students contemplate withdrawal for (often multiple) internal reasons suggesting complex issues which require ad hoc, bespoke attention. An understanding that withdrawal sometimes results from a cumulative effect of small problems has shaped the First Year Tutor role as one which helps students disaggregate issues and deal effectively with each issue individually. First Year Tutors support students through multiple university support systems and follow up referrals to ensure each pathway is completed with a successful outcome.

First Year Tutors help students develop relationships and improve confidence in contacting academic staff, empowering them through knowledge of systems and expectations. The First Year Tutor role communicates more informally and helps to support students' entry into relationships with staff and university systems. The virtual culture created provides information and early social integration for pre-entry students linking to the model of early engagement relating to belonging and intimacy as asserted by Cashmore *et al.* (2012).

Student advisers were the preferred source of help for issues around non-completion of assessments (McCary *et al.*, 2011: 9). This ties in with findings that students want advisers who are more readily available as issues surrounding assessments and deadlines are usually highly stressful, urgent issues and the First Year Tutors have developed a 24-hour-response guarantee as a solution to both these needs.

## Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Significantly, the role has resulted in a decrease (of 3.7%) in the percentage of students who withdrew from IHCA in 2011–12 in comparison with 2010–11, despite an anticipated increase in the number of withdrawals. Furthermore, there is actually a reversal in the worrying trend of increasing first-year withdrawals each year in the institute and retention figures for the institute have now exceeded figures for 2009–10 by 0.6%.

At the end of the pilot year emails were sent to all first-year students asking for anonymous feedback. Every email received was positive and endorsed the role based upon the difference it had made to their wellbeing, success and ultimate continuation of study:

“It's been such a great help knowing that the 1st year tutors are there to give us any help we need. Sometimes it is not possible, or appropriate to see a lecturer, and it can be difficult to know who else to go to.”

*“I have found you to be a great support, and it is such a comfort to know that I am able to go for support and information whenever I need it, and I'm never made to feel that my problems are too trivial or not important.”*

Among many emails praising the service, six students explicitly stated that they probably would have withdrawn from the university were it not for the First Year Tutor service. The following have been extracted from two of these emails:

*“Speaking from my situation, I would not have known where to go, or who to speak to without this service; I would go so far as to say that without this service I would probably have dropped out of Uni. The entire Uni scenario is a daunting experience for any first year, so the fact that we have somewhere to go and someone to turn to in times of struggle just makes the Uni experience that bit more tolerable.”*

“I think you dealt with my issues very well indeed. So much so, if not for your support, I'm not sure that I would be continuing with my studies. What was particularly helpful was that you had experienced similar circumstances to myself and could therefore appreciate my difficulties.”

Now in its second year, the First Year Tutor contact records show evidence of greater integration within the Institute of Humanities and Creative Arts both in an earlier, wider and greater take-up by students and in staff being increasingly aware of the service and referring students to the First Year Tutors. A more cohesive approach has been implemented, in which First Year Tutors are actively involved in recruitment, induction and social events, and in learning and teaching discussions which occur at institute and department levels. This addresses the disorientation we perceived in feedback and ensures a continual dialogue and a raised profile with faculty in which ideas may also be shared. In 2012–13 the First Year Tutors will be further involved in university visit days and visits to local schools and colleges to engage earlier and in person with a wider range of prospective students.

Greater promotion and use of Twitter and Facebook this year attempts to engage with students who are still adapting to university emailing systems or find communication at all intimidating.

Staff report that previously detached students who had contact with the First Year Tutors began to approach them later in their first year or in their second year, suggesting First Year Tutors successfully helped some students to communicate with staff. Furthermore, the practice of emailing prior to or following an absence has been deeply embedded and staff feedback and email records show students continue to notify the university in their second and third year when attendance monitoring and automatic emails do not occur. Attendance monitoring will continue with First Year Tutors also using social media to contact students who do not respond to emails.

## Conclusion

A well-promoted source of advice and support at an institute, school or faculty level both acknowledges and legitimates students' initial feelings of insecurity, anxiety and disorientation. Presenting the role as designated time and providing bespoke support to individual students further encourages them to engage without feeling they are a burdens for example to academic staff.

Adopting a liminal position between student and staff allows First Year Tutors to function as a first point of contact, establishing a consistent pattern of speedy support to facilitate first year students' transition into centralised and perhaps more complex and specialised support systems. As the First Year Tutors become familiar to students in, and often before, induction week, their role as the first point of contact lessens any misgivings students might have about reaching out for information and support and as such increases the likelihood of students seeking help by lowering the first hurdle of entering support systems within the university.

A First Year Tutor role would ideally have access to attendance records (where these are taken) and be able to communicate (via both automatic and personalised messages) and provide support to staff and students based upon this.

The opportunity to communicate privately on Facebook or Twitter is recommended, particularly at weekends and during holidays and especially for students who have been unresponsive to or are avoiding contact with academic staff. Students often find social networking sites easier to access and feel more secure as they associate them with the private sphere, whereas they connect their email account with a public/university sphere which they may find stressful or difficult. Thus the First Year Tutors engage in personal spheres which many academic staff feel awkward or cautious about engaging in.

Finally, while being accessible and providing a quick response it is vital to both resolve issues before they escalate and to keep student anxiety levels low. Being proactive and maintaining regular communication incites students to be reflective and informs them of information which they may not otherwise seek out or even realise they need.

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## Mapping transition: An interactive workshop

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### Keywords

- retention
- transition
- induction
- first-year experience
- staff development
- student experience

### Nature of intervention

Adaptable hands-on staff workshops run by the Educational Development Unit at the University of Greenwich, mapping first-year transition and institutional provision longitudinally using the metaphor of “snakes and ladders”.

### Focus of intervention

The intervention is aimed at both academic and professional staff, in either separate or joint groups, where an emphasis on social interaction is facilitated through hands-on activity.

The workshop materials encourage staff to consider student experience in a broad and holistic way, encompassing academic, social and administrative aspects and the ways in which these may be interconnected in students’ experience. The workshop informs academic and professional practice, aiming to enhance the student experience and improve practice. It can be used to feed into specific action planning and encourages building of cross-institutional and inter-departmental relationships.

### Description of intervention

Student feedback and known retention issues are used to stimulate discussion and sharing of experience in a two-hour workshop, to inform continuous improvement. Presenting challenges faced by new students as “snakes”, and strategies to help students meet these challenges as “ladders”, enables staff to consider the student journey and map student transition longitudinally.

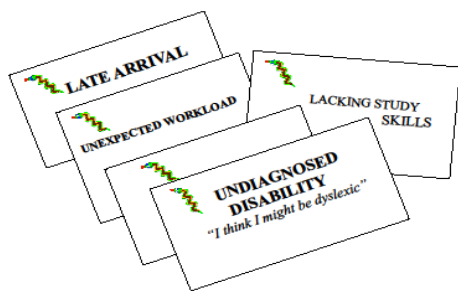
Beginning with brief general discussion of experience of “newness”, the main activity is discussion in groups focused on particular student cohorts (undergraduate students, international students, mature students, off-campus students, and so on). Each group has a length of lining paper (approximately 200 x 50 cm), which is annotated along the edge as illustrated in Figure 1:

Pre arrival	First Week	First Term	First assessment	Second Term	Third Term

**Figure 1: Lining paper ‘time-line’**

These headings are spaced at intervals to represent the progress of a year of study, providing a time-line on which the group will place the snakes and ladders cards. The workshop requires flexible space to allow movement of participants around tables of sufficient size for the mapping paper. Participants first study the set of ‘snakes’ cards as illustrated in Figure 2, describing the potential pitfalls, challenges and barriers which students tell us affect their university experience.

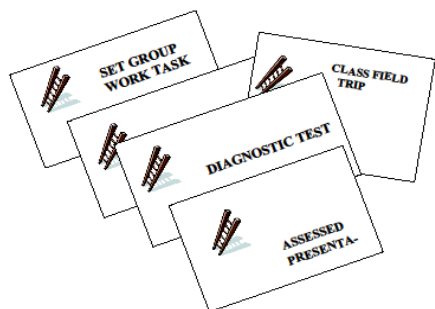




**Figure 2: 'Snakes' cards**

Each group is asked to select those most relevant to the cohort they are considering; to amend, annotate and/or add to the set using blank cards provided; and then to map them through the first year, placing them at the point(s) in the year where there may be an issue for students.

Participants then repeat the process with a set of ladder cards as illustrated in Figure 3, including both pre-populated and blank cards, describing the enabling interventions that students and staff tell us have worked in responding to these challenges.



**Figure 3: 'Ladders' cards**

They are asked to identify and include strategies which they are familiar with, institutionally or in their own department, and also to consider new strategies which could be put in place. Participants do this by matching strategies (ladders) to the challenges (snakes) and by formulating new strategies where there seem to be gaps (snakes with no matching ladder).

This inclusive and hands-on process encourages participants to consider how new students feel, what challenges they face and what helps. It facilitates reflection on, and dialogue about, existing practice and potential innovations.

Sector research gives many examples of why students stay or leave, and of strategies for retention (Cook & Rushton, 2008, 2009; Crosling *et al.*, 2007; Yorke and Longden, 2008) and these have shaped the workshop materials. The snakes and ladders cards are based directly on this research as well as on local feedback from students and staff. Their content ranges from pedagogy, for example the value of learner-centred constructivist paradigms identified as important for success (Thomas and May 2011, Crosling *et al.*, 2008), to central support services, for example referring students for specialist advice.

Examples of snake cards (with direct quotes from students):

- **Student Mindset** – “There is a big jump from spoon-fed secondary school to university. A lot of students are in the wrong mindset when they arrive and never seem to escape it.” (A university of Greenwich student at a world cafe event, February 2011)
- **Feeling Left Out** – “I felt that being a middle-class mature student did not help my integration into student life: I felt that my experience and knowledge put me on a different footing from other students.” (Yorke and Longden, 2008: 108)
- **Lacking Study Skills** – “When you take notes you forget what they are saying. When you go back to your notes you wonder what you have written down. . . .” (Crosling *et al.*, 2008: 70)

Examples of ladder cards:

- early tutorial group discussion of students' expectations of university and university's expectations of students;
- student–staff social events;
- build early formative feedback into course design to ensure students reflect and build on their work.

In addition to the ladders, with specific and applied examples of implementation, a checklist of broader approaches to retention may be provided to aid in the exploration of new initiatives, particularly if there are challenges (snakes) for which strategies have not been identified. The checklist is based on the University of Greenwich's Statement of Entitlement for new students and on Cook and Rushton's list of successful retention strategies (2008: 12).

Group reflection is summed up in reporting back of key issues and strategies identified in each group. Transcripts of the workshop artefacts are provided as a follow-up.

### **How the intervention engages students**

Students who complete our New Arrivals survey and leave their details for follow-up are invited to participate in the workshops. On the occasions where this happens, the students are extremely enthusiastic about being part of the university's development and planning and have enjoyed and valued the process of reflection on their experience, and dialogue with staff. Staff, in turn, comment that it is "good to hear students' views and experiences" (staff workshop evaluation, 2012). The views of students from our university surveys and other feedback activities form the basis of the snake cards, which include direct quotes from students.

Planning for student engagement is also an aim of the workshop. The strategies discussed and suggested, and the institutional Statement of Entitlement for new students which these reflect, emphasise the importance of fostering engagement and relationships for transition, in contrast to earlier approaches which sometimes emphasised information-giving. Early and ongoing interactivity to build relationships and engagement have also been identified as key to retention (Pennington, 2010; Yorke and Thomas 2003; Yorke and Longden, 2008; Beard *et al.*, 2007; Thomas and May, 2011) and the workshop shares some of this research in an effective and meaningful way, encouraging staff to identify practical means of implementation.

### **Links to the What Works? findings**

The workshop encourages staff to take a longitudinal, integrated approach, to hear what students tell us about their experience and to identify what works to support transition for particular groups at various points in their journey. The need for embedded and staged transitional support is widely recognised in sector research (Tinto, 1975; Cook and Rushton, 2003, 2008) and is made explicit in the workshop which encourages thinking about "induction" as "a process instead of an event which is designed to promote peer group and staff/student interaction as well as academic preparation" (Cook and Rushton, 2003: 75). Workshop resources draw examples from the sector of what works to build relationships and confidence, and to foster a sense of belonging.

The workshop activities base reflection and planning directly in student experience, seen holistically and with attention to the quality and extent of students' interactions with the institution in a broad sense (cf. Thomas 2002, Thomas and May 2010). This is done through student participation and use of student feedback in workshop materials, and in the range of examples and issues which are drawn from all areas of student experience. This encourages staff to embrace a holistic approach across the institution, building vital cross-institutional collaboration (Yorke and Thomas 2003).

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

This workshop has been an important element in cross-institutional development of provision for new students at the University of Greenwich and has helped to develop, disseminate and embed enhancements and policy. It has contributed to an institutional shift from a focus primarily on the first week and information-giving to a more extended and integrated view of transition, with more engagement activities.

Evidence from our university New Arrivals Survey shows increasing levels of student satisfaction and feelings of belonging; this workshop has been a factor in this improvement and is part of our strategy for continuous improvement.

The workshop has given increased understanding of staff experiences of supporting new students and insight into the range of practice and innovations across the institution, and has fed into development of new staff resources. The workshop has become part of the university's regular programme of staff development.

Over 70 members of staff participated in six workshops between June 2011 and June 2012. Workshops have been cross-institutional (four), or department-based (two), with participants from academic schools, student services, recruitment and admissions and information and library services. In a cross-institutional context, staff appreciate learning from one another's experience and practice and dialogue is fostered. In a departmental context, there is scope for focused programme-based review and planning.

The workshop reflects a constructivist paradigm and aspects of Beard and Wilson's (2006) experiential learning model. It elicits discussion and sharing of experience and the hands-on nature of the activities is effective in facilitating creative conversations between staff that otherwise might not recognise shared responsibility or opportunities. Active participation has been seen in all workshops, a few initially reluctant colleagues being successfully drawn into the activities. One colleague attended two instances of this workshop and found that the second experience was equally worthwhile, generating new discussion and insights.

Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with over 95% reporting satisfied expectations, the workshop being described as an "excellent learning experience" and a "brilliant session". One participant reported unmet expectations "in a good way", having expected an "outline of procedures for induction week" but finding the snakes and ladders exercise very useful. All those who gave feedback found the workshop constructive, evaluating it as providing "interesting discussions and different perspectives"; that "It was helpful to think more deliberately about the issues which might affect students' experience during induction/transition"; and one participant commented on how useful it was to gain a "broader view beyond Week One".

Staff valued the "interaction with other staff and especially discussion with the student" and "the group work solution" and found that "the game of snakes and ladders got people talking and sharing their experience and solutions" and "thinking about ladders". It "really made the problems clearly evident and then we looked at possibly improving the issues identified"; "the exercise (snakes and ladders) . . . revealed how different groups tackled the issues around new students". Participants very much appreciate the insights they gain from learning about experience and strategies in other parts of the university as "exchanging ideas", "picking up new ideas" and "hearing other programmes' plans" were perceived as important opportunities and outcomes. One colleague valued the "opportunity to reflect on strengths and weaknesses (within my department)". It has been common for the workshop to end with staff exchanging contact information, in order to continue the dialogue.

## Conclusion

This workshop has been developed and positively evaluated with cross-institutional and academic groups, replacing earlier more instructional workshops. The workshop raises awareness among all staff that transition is more than just the first week or weeks, and must be understood and provided for from pre-arrival through the entire first year and beyond. It is adaptable for focus on programme/curriculum issues or wider consideration of university life and offers a toolkit for development work and sharing and embedding of effective practice. In 2013 the workshop will be adapted for focus on postgraduate students, and for discussion of the impact of a new academic calendar on transition.

For other higher education institutes considering using or adapting this workshop, the following suggestions arise from experience at Greenwich:

- It is recommended that blank cards are provided to allow participants to formulate and add their own snakes and ladders.
- It is recommended that more blank cards should be provided than pre-populated; given examples help to get discussion going, but too many can prevent staff from reflecting and drawing on their own direct experience. For experienced teams more emphasis may be given to the production of new snakes and ladders cards to elicit their own examples and new ideas, whereas for newer staff more pre-prepared snakes and ladders might be provided for insight and inspiration.
- Consider how the composition of the group/s may affect the selection of snakes and ladders cards. Selection can be made from a larger set of both snakes and ladders for each workshop, depending on the participants and aim of the workshop in each instance.
- It is valuable to build in the opportunity for participants to walk around the room and look at the mapping of other groups, and this can be combined with a refreshment break.
- It can also be useful to allow time for individuals to share particular ideas which they are taking away.
- If extended into a longer session, the activities described here may be usefully followed by department-specific action planning or by discussion of specific activities (for example, personal tutoring).
- The snakes and ladders approach may be adapted as a tool for other topics (for example, retention or employability).

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Related publications, resources and further information

Further information, snakes and ladders templates, sample workshop schedules and details of necessary equipment can be obtained from [s.e.alsford@gre.ac.uk](mailto:s.e.alsford@gre.ac.uk) and from <http://www.jiscdesignstudio.pbworks.com>. The workshop toolkit is being developed.

## Enhancing the induction period through student-designed activity

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### Keywords

- sense of belonging
- group cohesion
- induction
- students as partners
- shared practice

### Nature of intervention

Student experience enhancement activities through induction redesign by Speech and Language Therapy students and staff at Cardiff Metropolitan University.

### Focus of intervention

The intervention had both academic and social aspects to the design and outcome. The aim was to improve the student experience from a social cohesion point of view but also, in some part, to improve practice in the delivery of the induction period.

### Description of intervention

The period of transition into university life is a well researched area. See, for example, York and Longden (2008) and Harvey, Drew and Smith (2006). Tinto's (1987) Theory of Student Integration is a widely accepted model of transition and it highlights a student's early experiences at university as one of the major factors that determines students' persistence at the institution and course. This led to some internal research being carried out within the institution through withdrawal surveys, diary room, institutional data, focus groups and so on, where it was noted that academic and social spheres are both important. Examples of comments from students included:

- they would benefit from more opportunities to interact with their peers and tutors;
- mature students who felt that induction activities were primarily targeted towards younger, full-time entrants thereby causing them to become disengaged from their programmes and fellow students early on;
- the need to have more defined links with the programme from an early stage to create a sense of community.

It is this continually updated research that informs the themes that are used to underpin the bid process below.

Each academic year the Learning and Teaching Development Unit invites individual programme teams to apply for assistance to enhance/redesign their induction period. In March, programme leaders are asked to submit bids in relation to different themes relating to induction, ranging from activities that target mature students to activities that promote social cohesion, extended inductions, peer support and students as partners.

The successful bids have ranged from the inclusion of one-off activities within a set programme, to a process that has lasted beyond the first term and also complete redesigns of induction plans. Staff were also asked to comment on any changes they felt were necessary and also how they felt the work could continue from a sustainability point of view.

The BSc (Hons) Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) staff had a bid accepted which would be incorporated into part of their ongoing attrition strategy. The aim of the project would be to see a number of student-driven initiatives incorporated into pre-entry and induction activities.

A meeting was held with three students coming to the end of their first-year experience, an institutional student retention officer (based in the Learning and Teaching Development Unit) and an academic member of staff responsible for Year 1 induction. This meeting and those that followed were used to review the feedback forms from the previous inductions, highlight research from within the university and the sector, and to ask the students for ideas about what they felt would have

improved their initial experience as a Speech and Language Therapy student. From this, a newly designed induction plan was created which included student-driven activities both pre-entry and during induction.

The activities included a welcoming letter written by the three students to be included in joining packs; this included a link to a Facebook page they had set up and an FAQ information sheet the students had written from a student's point of view.

During the induction period, the students set up a Speech and Language Therapy Society called SALTSOC. This was open to all four years of the programme and the three initial organisers of the society went into classes for all years to promote the society and part of the induction funding was used to support the first two social events. These included a coffee morning for all four years to gather and talk informally and a Halloween-themed evening in and around Cardiff. A stand was also held at the university's Freshers Fayre to promote the society.

The induction week changed to incorporate many more tasks and smaller bite-sized sessions as comments had previously been received regarding the length of sessions and the spacing in between, which had led to some being poorly attended. An ice-breaker session was included as it was felt there were a lot of students who lived off campus and travelled independently into campus and therefore did not have an opportunity to meet with fellow students outside the programme. An informal talk from current second years was held where the new entrants could ask questions, and also a session with all SLT staff so that students became aware of all the staff members. One area that had previously been commented upon as weak area was the study skills/library session. This led to students redesigning the programme to create a new interactive library quiz that included all the information they would have liked to have known when completing their first assignment. The quiz was led by the three second-year students on the day with activities in the classroom, library and computer room.

The SALTSOC has since been awarded funding for another project to develop further with increased input and discussion from both students and academic members of staff and it is now seen as something that has fitted into the curriculum with an online peer network site created that now includes a placement area, journal club and a link to a programme exchange in America.

### **How the intervention engages students**

The students have been involved at all stages throughout the project and have taken the initial aim and scope and developed it further to produce ideas they feel will assist the enhancement of their experience. This development, whilst supported by academic staff members and staff from the Learning and Development Unit, was mainly driven by the students and its continuation has been driven by them to branch out into areas they feel would add to their course. Students have met regularly with members of academic staff to discuss their ideas and whether they are possible from learning and teaching/administrative perspectives and therefore have entered into a mutual relationship to enhance the programme and their own development. The activities during the induction period have led to a much more interactive first week, where students have been able to experience different course-related information rather than being talked at. The students have engaged with the process of critical analysis as part of the journal club and have used this to further their personal development within their own time. The society has been set up and all members are encouraged to become a part of it and take part in different events and activities. Graduates have also been involved in the site/network and have provided valuable insight into life after university.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

The project has allowed changes to be made on an individual programme basis as well as in the way we look at and the purpose of induction design across the whole institution. The What Works? findings have highlighted the importance of engagement in both the academic and social spheres and its links to increased retention and success, which influenced the focus and nature of the induction project call that was sent to all programme leaders.

The evaluations have shown that a student needs to have a sense of belonging if they are to persist with their studies. This was evident in the attitudes of students who had taken part in interventions which sought to increase social cohesion, as well as the improved retention rates of students who had participated in team-building exercises. They also need to feel they have the support necessary to encounter issues that may arise, as affirmed by the SALTSOC website. This also showed the importance of working together with students to provide a tool that is in the right format to assist them.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

The effectiveness/impact of the project was measured in a number of different ways. An evaluation form was handed out to all first-year students at the end of the first term. This was to allow time to see what impact the induction had on their initial experiences. The form asked students to highlight what they had gained most from the induction and if any changes could offer further support. Highlights included: the information they had gained from the quiz; feeling confident in being able to find information for their first assignment; meeting other years; learning about placement experiences; and feeling welcomed. All students felt more confident about starting the course and one said it had helped with their homesickness. Recommendations for changes or additions included: a review of each term on a sheet of A4; and a breakdown of how different modules link

together. This information will now be fed back into the group discussions that will occur between student representatives and staff with the review of the induction period ready for the following year.

The Facebook site set up by the student interns was reviewed and had over 60% membership from the students who had been sent details in their joining packs. Following a request from the students to have somewhere more formal and professional, a specific peer network site has been set up, linked to the student portal. The retention of the first-year students at the end of the first term was 100%. Early withdrawal had previously been an issue and this was one of the main targets of the project: to assist in the retention rate during this initial period.

The activities have been adapted and incorporated into a number of other different programmes across the university. The quiz designed by the students is programme specific and prepares for the first assignment. Since the development of the online peer network, these too have been used by other programmes, but with adaptations to fit the specific needs of those students. The project findings are now part of a session that is delivered by members of the Learning and Teaching Development Team, to support members of staff in induction design and implementation.

## **Conclusion**

The results of this project have shown the importance of including students in interventions from the start of the academic year so that a relationship can be built. Students felt more confident entering their studies and first assignment. They also felt part of a community and able to speak to fellow students for support.

The importance of linking the activities with learning and teaching practice in their programme can be seen through the success of the library/IT quiz, which previously had been criticised for its content and delivery, but with the delivery by students who had experienced the first term, and the direct link to the first assignment subject area, higher levels of engagement were achieved.

The design of the intervention worked at its best when all sides (student, academic and support staff) were able to work together. Although students needed some direction and support, they were able to guide the direction of the intervention for maximum uptake by their fellow students on their course.

It was important to note that the project needed time to evolve before the true output was achieved, meaning the initial methods and outcomes had to be flexible if the aims were going to be met, which are of building engaging induction processes and a supportive society that encourages both social cohesion and academic support.

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## Moving forward: Enhancing transition, progression and retention through partnership

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### Keywords

- progression
- retention
- staff and student engagement
- collaborative working

### Nature of intervention

University-wide student experience enhancement project, to improve progression and retention, across the institution as a whole.

### Focus of intervention

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

### Description of intervention

Moving Forward is a university-wide initiative representing a co-ordinated institutional strategy for transition, progression and retention, and evidence-based practice focusing on partnership working (Krause, 2006; Whittaker, 2008) between: the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning; the Caledonian Academy; all academic schools; Learner Support; the Students' Association; Academic Registry; Marketing and Communications; and other support departments. The aims of Moving Forward are to:

- improve progression rates;
- enhance the student experience in terms of transition to the university;
- develop, support the implementation of and evaluate the university's Transition and Progression Framework in conjunction with the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy and other relevant university policies;
- provide greater support for staff in developing and implementing strategies to address issues associated with transition and progression.

The work of Moving Forward was undertaken in six key stages:

- consultation with both staff and students;
- development of the university's Transition and Progression Framework;
- Mini Communities of Practice;
- interim evaluation;
- partnership agreements;
- Moving Forward Development Funding Awards.

Moving Forward has provided an opportunity for the university to think critically and creatively about the way in which it supports transition and progression. It has succeeded in supporting the improvement of progression and retention rates across the university by encouraging widespread staff and student engagement through its continuous consultation, Mini Communities of Practice, partnership agreements with academic schools and Learner Support, introducing Moving Forward Development Funding Awards and dissemination and sharing of practice. Its work formed the basis of the university's new Widening Participation Strategy, built on a 'Transformative Model of Widening Participation' (Thomas, 2005) and has laid the foundation for its implementation.

The initiative has secured a high level of staff and student engagement via a continuous consultation with all its stakeholders. Parallel to the staff consultation sessions, student focus groups were held to discuss issues in relation to transition and progression. Together with the outcomes of institutional student surveys and the outcomes of the National Student Survey, they formed the basis for the student input into the development of the Transition and Progression Framework.



Moving Forward showcases taking responsibility for managing engagement of both students and staff that forms the core of Moving Forward and has been the basis for its success. Adopting a two-tier approach (top-down and bottom-up) to motivate staff and students to participate in the processes of change and to support an all-encompassing strategy combining student support, learning, teaching, assessment, and employability ensured that the University's model of Widening Participation is transformative and all-inclusive to enable an increasingly diverse student population to become successful graduates.

The Mini Communities of Practice proved to be the most successful way of encouraging staff and students to engage with each other by offering a bottom-up approach for development work and sharing of practice. One reason for the success of the Mini Communities of Practice was that their inception and launch formed part of the consultation phase, which made sure that the themes covered by them were relevant to students and staff. They include: feedback from the student perspective; student empowerment; staff–student communication; developing the independent learner; supporting induction; and engagement with secondary schools and colleges.

Introducing Moving Forward Development Funding Awards also proved to be successful in allowing the academic schools, the Students' Association and all the Mini Communities of Practice to build on their work with Moving Forward and take it forward in the form of pilot projects. In order to enable transferability across the institution and to encourage sustainable approaches to enhancing the student experience, the funding awards included conditions like pro-active student involvement, cross-institutional collaboration, and evidence of sustainability beyond the funding period. Although not all academic schools or Mini Communities of Practice applied for those awards, those that were funded have had positive feedback, with some presenting their outcomes at an internal poster event and at international conferences.

### **How the intervention engages students**

Students participated from the start in the form of student focus groups and have had opportunities to get involved through our Mini Communities of Practice and the Moving Forward Development Funding Awards. For instance, the 'Student Empowerment' Mini Community of Practice had asked to facilitate joint meetings with the Learning, Teaching, Feedback and Assessment Mini Community of Practice to support the Students' Association's feedback campaign, resulting in a feedback poster campaign.

Introducing pro-active student involvement, as a necessary requirement for the Moving Forward Development Funding Awards, ensured that students were not only seen as sources of feedback, but also as equal partners within the project teams. The employability project has seen Computer Science students design a website for Social Science students, providing information on career opportunities, vidcasts and podcasts with employers and former graduates, as part of their final year Honours project. They also won a prize for best poster presentation at an internal Learning and Teaching showcase event and went on to present their work at an international conference. The GCU (Glasgow Caledonian University) Culture project, run by the Students' Association, introduced the Global Café, Caley Olympics and Caley's Got Talent, where home students and international students can meet and learn from each other.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

Moving Forward has embraced the characteristics of effective approaches defined in the What Works? findings (Thomas, 2012: 20). From its inception, Moving Forward has been a mainstream approach to enhancing the student experience and to improving student progression and retention by adopting a partnership model and by developing a Transition and Progression Framework aimed at supporting all students to become engaged and develop a sense of belonging.

Its pro-active partnership approach proved to be invaluable in achieving a continually high level of staff and student engagement and collaboration. By applying a continuous evaluation throughout, its themes and topics remained relevant to staff and students. That it encouraged pro-active involvement for the duration of the project allowed the initiative to be flexible and responsive, for instance with regard to the student feedback campaign, when it joined forces with the Students' Association.

One of the lessons learnt by Moving Forward is that to transform the academic sphere in order to enhance the student experience is extremely difficult. Amongst academic members of staff there is still significant resistance to reviewing, assessing and changing approaches to learning, teaching and assessment even though there is a wealth of research to prove how important adopting such a practice is.

## Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Moving Forward was evaluated throughout and an extensive interim evaluation was undertaken, using mixed methods (web-based survey, short evaluation pro-formas and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders) to ensure breadth and depth of coverage. This evaluation focused on the following four key aspects of the work of Moving Forward:

- Moving Forward's partnership approach;
- how the Transition and Progression Framework is perceived by the wider university community;
- feedback on the impacts of the Mini Communities of Practice;
- what kind of priority the wider university community would like to be seen taken on by the initiative.

Data derived from this evaluation was exceptionally positive and highlighted some of the point below.

More than 70% of survey respondents were aware of the partnership approach and agreement that it is important to listen to staff and students:

*"Very positive, particularly in regard to the partnership approach that has been developed with colleges as well as staff within GCU, and in the development of the themed mini-Communities of Practice."*

Of the survey respondents, 76% found the Transition and Progression Framework useful or very useful:

*"It provides guidance and allows schools, departments and support services to pick and choose which area they want to tackle. It's also very practically oriented and backed-up well by examples of practice."*

More than 70% of survey respondents viewed the Mini Communities of Practice positively, providing strong evidence that Moving Forward has been successful in enabling cross-institutional communication and discussion:

*"It's been a great way of finding out what other people do and also to establish new contacts and networks across the university and with colleagues."*

*"The MF Mini CoPs represent a sustained approach to staff development across the university and college sectors . . ."*

*"From the perspective of the Students' Association, this project has been an important part of how we look to obtain feedback from Class Representatives on transitional issues and other areas through informing the type of discussions held and questions asked of students."*

With a view to continuing to engage as many members of staff and students as possible, the project continued to gather feedback, particularly in relation to the Mini Communities of Practice. At the end of the sessions, participants were asked to comment on the following:

- Why did you come to the meeting today?

*"Because I care about student engagement."*

*"Interested in the student perspective."*

*"It is important for us to know what students' needs are."*

- What do you want to get out of today's meeting?

*"Forward plan and action points for group to take forward."*

*"Set objectives to meet the needs of our student population."*

*"Get a broader understanding of what's happening across GCU."*

- What do you think is the next step forward?

*"Try to come up with a manageable number of goals/changes we can make in short term."*

*"The development of a university wide user-friendly guide for students and staff."*

*"Producing literature students can relate to and reader friendly, fliers/posters etc."*

*"Put together a guidance document plan."*

Although this only provides a snapshot of the work of Moving Forward, it highlights the significance of student input and the desire for practical solutions and outcomes.

## Conclusion

Moving Forward has proven to be a highly successful initiative, not least because of its partnership approach. By bringing together key players within individual Schools and Central Departments, sharing information on research conducted into the student experience at the university, and discussing a set of questions aimed at tackling issues of transition, progression and retention, Moving Forward was able to engage a large number of staff as well as students.

Acknowledging that staff and student engagement is key to achieving transformational change, the partnership working continued in the form of Mini Communities of Practice providing a platform for cross-institutional and inter-institutional communication. These have proven to be vital in sustaining staff and student engagement and supporting the implementation of the Transition and Progression Framework.

Moving Forward's focus on partnership working and enhancing cross-institutional communication has been acknowledged in feedback from staff and students, in that it was chosen as a case study for the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) and that external agencies such as the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions programme (SPA), the Quality Assurance Agency, linked to the Quality Enhancement Themes, and the Northwest JISC Forum have used it as an example of excellent practice.

However, from an institutional point of view, the work of Moving Forward also demonstrated the need for clarity in relation to how different university policies, strategies, frameworks, initiatives and projects interrelate and depend on each other to allow a coherent approach to issues regarding the student experience at the university. Additionally, the continued need for facilitation of the Mini Communities of Practice emphasised the requirement for a dedicated team to enable staff and students to come together with a view to communicating and collaborating with each other.

Recommendations include that there should be a dedicated Widening Participation team:

- to provide a leadership role within and an 'observatory' role beyond the university, in terms of learning and teaching policy and practice in relation to transition, progression, retention, an inclusive curriculum, and student engagement (regionally, nationally and internationally) in order to help to embed contextualised best practice and identify areas for further development within the university;
- to continue to support cross-institutional communication, collaboration and sharing of practice through a community of practice model;
- to clarify linkages and interdependencies between the various university policies and strategies that impact on the student experience, enabling members of staff to demonstrate how their development work impacts on multiple aspects of the student experience and supports various university policies and strategies.

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## Section 2: Learning and teaching

Section 2 introduces 13 interventions which focus on four different themes: the improvement of quantitative and research skills; professional development in order to promote employability; the strength of formative and summative feedback techniques; and the empowerment of students to take ownership of their learning experience in order to support students.

The first intervention discussed in this section comes from the University of Sheffield. Tom Clark *et al.* show how undergraduate research skills can be improved through inquiry-based learning and curriculum development approaches. This is followed by a paper by Rachel Byatt at the University of Central Lancashire who presents a successful intervention which looks at the issues around mathematics in nurse education. Following this, Stefania Paladini and Xavier Pierron of Coventry University Business School discuss how portfolio learning can promote academic success. Finally Foster *et al.* from the University of Sheffield show how the targeted teaching of quantitative methods can promote numeracy amongst social science students, improving student satisfaction and ultimately promoting employability.

Student employability is the focus of the next two interventions, starting with an article by Solomon Madubuike of Bowen University, Nigeria, who describes the impact of a General Studies programme taught at universities across Nigeria. The second article focusing on employability comes from Cardiff University where the value of placements is discussed by Maria Clarke and Rachel Treseder who note the importance of professional experience in learning.

Following this the next two papers promote the improvement of learning and teaching through feedback. Peggy Murphy describes FeedForward, a successful project at the Glynd Glyndŵr University Nursing Programme. Stephen Case at Swansea University discusses the role of formative and summative feedback in assessment and learning. The final four papers in this section propose interventions which encourage students to take ownership of their academic development. Wendy Leadbeater *et al.* investigate the impact of supplemental lecture recordings on academic performance at the University of Birmingham. Rashid Doubell *et al.* discuss an approach whereby medical students are given individual support at the School of Medicine at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, Bahrain. The next paper, by Roy Williams at the University of Portsmouth, describes the *Nested Narratives* intervention which is used to promote positive learning relationships. The final paper in this section, by Sandra Shaffi and Keith Savage, describes an ongoing project at Stockport College that aims to integrate student input into the feedback process.

# Research methods teaching in the social sciences: An integrated approach to inquiry-based learning and curriculum development in Sociological Studies

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## Keywords

- research methods
- inquiry-based learning
- research spine
- qualitative skills
- quantitative skills
- curriculum development

## Nature of intervention

The development of research skills among undergraduate students in the Department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield through an integrated approach to inquiry-based learning (IBL) and curriculum development.

## Focus of intervention

The nature of the intervention is academic. In essence, it is aimed at enhancing the student experience and skills base in social research through curriculum redevelopment of the research methods (RM) programme in a manner which emphasises an inquiry-based approach.

## Description of intervention

A core element of most sociological undergraduate programmes is the research methods teaching. Unfortunately, it is all too frequently taught in a manner that does not support long-term retention or promote the central concern of sociology: the study of the social world. Often divorced from other programme content, 'text-book' approaches to methods regularly focus on technical knowledge rather than theoretically informed practice-based experience. Largely ignoring the reflexive principles of sociological research, the focus is usually on the well-rehearsed advantages and disadvantages of particular techniques. In short, research methods are divorced from practice-based experience. On the other hand, inquiry-based learning (IBL) stresses a research-led and student-orientated approach to teaching and learning, promoting theoretically informed practice-based learning. As applied to research methods, it involves *doing* research rather than the passive communication and reception of research knowledge by staff to students.

Given the potential of IBL, and the changing landscape of the higher education (HE) sector, the Department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield completely remodelled its undergraduate programme in 2008. As part of this process, the research methods provision within the programme was also re-orientated from an increasingly dated didactic approach towards one that directly supported an inquiry-based framework. Today, the five modules within the research methods spine aim to ensure a sound understanding of methods that underpin the whole programme, whilst also providing students with an identifiable range of skills that can be used in any number of employment environments. It also provides a secure platform that enables other substantive modules within the undergraduate programme to offer more innovative forms of research-based assessments.

The first module in the research methods spine is An Introduction to Social Inquiry, a level one, semester one module that introduces students to the theoretical, methodological and practical issues in conducting social research. The module content covers a range of issues essential in the 'reading' of research. Associated seminars provide students with the opportunity to explore these issues with reference to an accessible research topic, fear of crime, to see how these issues matter in practice as well as theory. The module also aims to integrate study skills by using a range of resources to provide students with the literature-searching skills necessary to undertake an undergraduate degree, as well as offering writing support through interactive sessions where students 'mark' their own work. Doing Social Research is taken in semester two of level one and consists of lectures and student-led workshops. It gives students the opportunity to develop practical experience of conducting research, from project planning through to writing up research. Further, it also operates to give students a wider appreciation of the department by asking them to conduct team-based research projects on the research of particular

members of staff. This allows them greater insight into the realities of the research process from the perspective of research-active staff, and enables them to develop a greater sense of affiliation with the department.

Social Research Principles is taken in semester one of level two. It aims to build on theoretical and practical experience gained at level one and enhance students' understanding of the principles of social research and related philosophical debates. Learning about a variety of methodological techniques, students are asked to judge which are appropriate to particular research problems and how to identify the merits and limitations of different research designs. This includes an explicit understanding of issues of sampling, objectivity, reliability and validity. In addition students are required to complete four IBL quantitative workbooks. Social Research Skills aims to equip students with the skills to plan, organise, and undertake qualitative and quantitative empirical research in sociological fields and asks them to use both primary and secondary data in order to produce research. This level two, semester two module is partly designed to pre-empt the difficulties students face whilst conducting research-based dissertations and involves proposal design. By explicitly requiring students to experience aspects of the research process *and* asking them to reflect on the process, it prepares students for the realities of *doing* research before they embark on their final-year dissertations.

The Dissertation in Sociology/Social Policy is taken throughout level three and involves gathering primary data, secondary analysis or desk-based theoretical enquiry. The dissertation is the culmination of the entire methods spine and gives students the opportunity, in the context of an original piece of research on a topic of their own choosing, to undertake an independent research project drawing upon their knowledge and experience of research from their training.

### **How the intervention engages students**

Whilst it will always be a challenge to change the perception that research method courses are 'dry', the new research spine has certainly enhanced students' capabilities and enjoyment. By encouraging a reflexive approach to 'finding out', the methods spine has been designed to allow students to clearly chart how their skills develop across the degree and it offers specifically delineated 'benchmarks' from which students can see their progress. This includes the successful completion of four discrete student-led research projects that require the deployment of a variety of quantitative and qualitative techniques as well as the skills that support the production of research and of critically informed knowledge more generally. Furthermore, the assessments within the spine also require students to: experience the problems of working within team-contexts *and* negotiate them; develop the confidence to work with autonomy; make critically informed decisions or seek supervision where appropriate; develop the flexibility to produce written, oral and visual material according to conventional requirements of format and style; and think reflexively about their practice in order to improve it. Therefore, students are engaged through a variety of IBL methods, tasks and activities which incorporate a variety of different learning styles and therefore enhance the likelihood of engagement with the principles and skills involved in social research.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

Our new IBL curriculum conforms to several of the What Works? principles. The student-focused content and research-led pedagogy clearly motivates students to engage with research and encourages them to be successful through a range of active, collaborative and inter-connected research projects. Taken together, the modules specifically require students to develop a range of tangible skills that can be used to solve research questions in a variety of contexts and culminates in a research-based dissertation. It is also evident that the teaching activities introduced facilitate greater interaction between students and members of staff. This is particularly apparent in the Doing Social Research module, which also resonates with What Works? principles of 'belonging', and is closely aligned with general department engagement and identity. Furthermore, the relevant examples used throughout the modules, and research skills that are developed there, allow students to shape the content to their own interests and provide them with tangible skills that they are encouraged to reflect upon and recognise. As such, the students are provided with clear evidence of the transferability of the various skills they have developed in terms of future employability.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

Initial reception to the modules has been very positive from students, staff and external examiners. Indeed, some of the comments from our external examiners have been extremely encouraging:

*"The sociology degree is a very strong one. It is certainly the best that I am aware of in the country. It is interesting, topical and rigorous . . . The real strength for me as an external of your programme is the dissertations and extended essays where I think your students demonstrate a real maturity in their work as well as the chance to show how they have built on their knowledge across the three years."*

Another suggested:

*"For me, dissertation work reflects the level of student engagement across a degree programme as a whole, and the work I read shows that students at Sheffield are very successfully applying sociological theory and methods to a very wide range of current substantive topics and current debates. The breadth and novelty of topics was very impressive, and reflects the scope and originality of modules offered at levels 2 and 3. Students are also clearly developing strong academic writing and researching skills, and engaging robustly with theory, all of which will stand them in very good stead for postgraduate study."*

Student evaluation of the modules has also been very positive. Students have enjoyed the sound foundation provided by level one research methods teaching including the opportunity to undertake primary research embedded within the department, interviewing staff members. This provided students with an opportunity “to meet new people and find out about what research staff are doing”. An internal review of SCS2003 in the 2011–12 sessions suggested that 94% of students taking this module would recommend the module and 97% were satisfied with this module. Students’ comments included: “Lectures were broken up by exercises/discussions which makes them much more interesting and useful instead of being lectured at for two hours”; “Good interactive learning in lectures” and “Interactive aspects, activities – made lectures more engaging”. With respect to SCS2004, 87% of students taking the module would recommend it to other students and 92% were satisfied with the module overall. It’s also worth noting that no student suggested that the inquiry-based quantitative project, which this module incorporated, was particularly problematic.

Furthermore, as an indicator of the improvement in students’ ability to plan and undertake research, the average mark for a dissertation in 2009 was 62.8 (n=64, IQR=9, sd=7.5); by the time the first cohort of students went through the enhanced inquiry-based programme in 2011, the average score had increased to 66.2 (n=67, IQR=9, sd=6.8).

## **Conclusion**

A number of factors have enabled the successful implementation of what we now refer to as ‘the research spine’. Firstly, our own belief in emphasising inquiry-based learning has been supported by management within the department and the wider university. In both the planning and their execution, inquiry-based approaches come at a cost in terms of time and effort. This usually means a higher workload for those taking on such courses and considerable commitment is necessary from the wider department to do this. It is also important not to be too ambitious. The term ‘research’ often disguises a diverse range of techniques and it is not possible to cover them all, no matter how hard colleagues badger you to include their own favourite methods! Fortunately, there are skills that are common to all forms of social research (literature searching, interpreting tables, coding and categorising qualitative data, and so on) and we have had the most success when focusing on those. Finally, it is also important to recognise the number of times you might have to revisit a topic or message before it ‘goes in’: practice makes perfect and students need learning spaces that allow them to practice.

Whilst IBL approaches to social research method courses can be labour intensive, and do require the support of senior members of staff, the impact on the quality of student outputs can be impressive, as our experiences continue to demonstrate.

# Improving student nurses' maths confidence and ability

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## Keywords

- nursing
- numeracy
- maths self-efficacy
- maths ability
- maths anxiety

## Nature of intervention

Improving student nurses' maths confidence and ability via numeracy drop-in sessions on both pre-registration and post-registration nursing courses in the School of Health at the University of Central Lancashire.

## Focus of intervention

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

## Description of intervention

Drug errors are the cause of 25% of all legal proceedings in the National Health Service (Wright, 2005). Tang *et al.* (2007) specified that between 65% and 87% of medication errors reported occurred during prescribing or administration. The two most common errors were the wrong dose being prescribed or the wrong calculated dose being administered. The numerical ability of both registered nurses and nursing students is a concern that is widely recorded in nursing research and literature (Kapborg, 1994; Hutton, 1998; Sandwell and Carson 2005). Numerical ability is not the only factor associated with poor maths skills amongst nurses, as according to Sabin (2001) confidence and anxiety are major contributing factors that impinge on numerical ability. O'Shea (1999) found that nurses who have poor mathematical skills will contribute to increasing the risk of medicine-related errors.

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) (2006, 2007) has recognised the importance of numeracy within nursing and requires that pre-registration nursing students pass a maths paper at 100% prior to qualifying; this is also common to the nurse prescriber students. Within all the nursing courses the author of this article is involved with, both pre- and post-registration, students continue to struggle with basic numeracy and medicine calculations. Within any numeracy examinations given to both pre- and post-registration student nurses, the pass rate is low. As a result, the author developed group supervision sessions, where students can practice basic numeracy along with medicine calculations. These are small group sessions that are additional to timetabled activities: students attend and within the small groups they practise numerical questions. The group members choose those aspects they wish to concentrate on and the author acts as a facilitator, allowing them to practice, but in cases of difficulty working through solutions using generic maths formulas. Students who have extreme difficulties can attend one-to-one sessions with the facilitator. In order for nurses to develop these skills, revision and continual practice cannot be underestimated. This is a common theme amongst researchers on this topic (Hutton, 1998; Wright, 2008; McMullan, 2010). The drop-in sessions enable students to practise in a safe environment where mistakes can be made without repercussions. This is deemed a pedagogical remedy that improves maths confidence, as positive encouragement, constructive criticism, without fear of humiliation is considered a must in increasing maths confidence and consequently ability (Bull, 2009; McMullan *et al.*, 2012). It also allows the students to assess their own ability and develop action plans to find out what their needs are. In order to find out whether their ability has improved, the students may complete online tests relating to the topic areas as well as practice tests in the taught class. In the first session, the students complete a maths test without using a calculator (the NMC stipulates calculators should not replace mathematical ability). The tests are marked by the facilitator who determines the student's weaknesses in order to establish an action plan for future sessions. As a group, the students and the facilitator plan the upcoming sessions and what will be covered in them, relating to the needs of the student. It is imperative that the content is spread over a number of sessions as a one-off hour-long session is considered insufficient to correct math problems and increase confidence (Maag, 2004). The students can also work with their peers and support and encourage each other.



## How the intervention engages students

The intervention engages students by offering a solution to what can be a very difficult subject for some. The students recognise they have numerical difficulties as they are tested on various occasions throughout the curriculum. Initially students engage with the drop-in sessions in order to prepare and pass a maths examination. Students also make errors in clinical skills sessions relating to medicine calculations, which increases their awareness of their difficulties. The students develop a study group and after the initial session the majority engage fully with the sessions and demand more of them. Students also become a study group and engage with fellow students who have similar difficulties. They also support their peers and help and support each other in the group sessions. The sessions are taught on days when the students are not attending university for timetabled sessions, but they are committed to attending to improve their confidence and ability. As they are attending the university for a drop-in session, it encourages them to seek module supervision, attend the library and use some of the wider services the university has to offer.

## Link to the What Works? findings

The drop-in sessions link to all of the What Works? findings. They encourage supportive peer relations amongst the students who share difficulties. They develop meaningful interactions between the facilitator and students as the students attend the sessions in their own time and the facilitator undertakes them but not in her allocated hours. It encourages the students to express maths anxiety knowing they will not be judged or criticised but encouraged and supported in developing their skills. This relationship starts early with the students and continues to build as the course progresses. It links to developing knowledge and confidence as the students improve their results in maths tests, and are more confident when carrying out medicine calculations both in clinical practice and in simulation sessions. The experience is relevant to their future, as for nurses, medicine calculations account for 40% of their time, and as qualified nurses they become accountable for their actions.

## Evidence of effectiveness/impact

The author undertook a small research study as part of her Masters degree. The findings were as follows:

Following pre- and post-intervention maths tests, a paired t-test was undertaken. Results indicated that there was a 95% certainty that the drop-in sessions improved mathematical ability. In comparison of the pre- and post-intervention scores, 92% (n=11) had improved their pre-intervention result, 8% (n=1) achieved the same score on the post-test. The mean increase in scores from pre- to post-intervention was 3.5 marks, the biggest improvement was 9/20 (45%) to 20/20 (100%). 80% (n = 4) also reported, during the interview, that their maths ability had improved as a result of the sessions.

The students completed questionnaires and interviews to ascertain if the drop-in sessions improve their maths confidence. Of the students, 80% (n=4) believed both their ability and maths confidence had improved as a result of the sessions. They were also asked about their experience of the sessions. All participants, 100%, stated the opportunity to refresh and practise their numeracy skills was the biggest advantage and found the organisation and management of the sessions a good experience, particularly the student-initiated learning and group work.

From the findings it is clear that the numeracy drop-in sessions do improve maths confidence and the ability of nurses both pre- and post-registration.

## Conclusion

In light of the findings, the sessions have now become a regular feature within the module and have been reported as best practice in the North West Nurse Prescribers Network. However, there are some recommendations for change following the study. Written maths tests lack the context of the clinical environment in which medicine calculations are performed, and as a result of this nurses make errors that are unrealistic and they struggle to detect them. An example of this was found by Jukes and Gilchrist (2006) when students gave 20 tablets instead of two. Although this is inconceivable the author has encountered similar mistakes in class, therefore she recommends bringing context into the sessions by providing prescription charts, medicine pots, syringes, placebo medicines, and so on. By doing this it is hoped that when a student pours out 60 ml of medicine for a 4-year-old child, he or she will realise their error. Further research is required with a larger sample size and a mixture of pre- and post-registration nurses in a bid to add a male perspective and a wider age range to the study.

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# Enhancing the quantitative skills of business students in a creative way: Assessment by portfolio

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## Keywords

- quantitative analysis
- portfolio
- student experience
- academic success

## Nature of the intervention

Maximise student engagement and academic success in quantitative methods at Coventry University Business School in the Department of Strategy and Applied Management.

## Focus of intervention

An intervention of an academic nature, aimed at enhancing student experience and improving practice is presented.

## Description of intervention

To address the particular issues involved in teaching a quantitative analysis module in a business school, the authors decided to design the coursework of a first-year module, Quantitative Analysis Management, in order to combine different kinds of assessment. In particular, a portfolio was introduced.

This effort clearly aims to embed the findings of the What Works? model in the current academic practice, in order to take advantage of its findings. The key elements identified are the need to maximise student engagement from the beginning and to encourage more peer interactions and group projects. The portfolio, allowing for a flexible mix of individual and group work, which has been introduced since Year 1, looked to be a particularly suitable tool. Another method has also been identified: by integrating the portfolio in an integrative assessment including three first-year modules, where other components of the model have been embedded. While this has not been discussed in detail in the present article, for reasons of space, nevertheless some observations have been provided in the conclusions.

Poor numeracy skills in the UK appear to be a persistent problem that is often reported by the UK press (*The Guardian*, 4 April 2009; *the Independent*, 8 December 2010). Other evidence comes from a research project funded by the Department for Education and Skills and undertaken at the University of Sheffield between April 2005 and March 2007. This study demonstrated that of the three key skills of reading, writing and numeracy, it is the latter which was the weakest amongst students. The report concludes that “on average, numeracy skills in England are poorer than in many other countries, especially industrialised ones” (NRDC, 2010: 8). Also, concerns have been raised by a number of British universities that the quantitative skills of their home students have been declining.

Undergraduate business students seem to find quantitative modules particularly challenging (Pokorny and Pokorny, 2005). Research into the teaching of statistics in higher education found a correlation between class attendance and results, suggesting that practice plays an important part in determining the success rate of students, no matter what their country of origin (Lawrence & Singhanian, 2004). Moreover, it has been pointed out (Chen and Lin, 2008) that the type of assessment used and the level of student engagement are key factors that determine the degree of academic success. This case study will outline and assess the impact of an innovative assessment method that was introduced on a quantitative skills module for business students.

The use of portfolios has gradually become popular in higher education. A major part of the rationale behind their introduction was that they were seen as a way of encouraging students to link theory and practice, translating abstract notions into real case studies and exercises. Such an approach is recommended by Gibbs (1988), who argues that “It is not enough just to do, and neither is it enough just to think. Nor is it enough simply to do and think. Learning from experience must involve linking the doing and the thinking” (Gibbs, 1988: 9).

Positive feedback on their use has also come from the students. For instance a survey carried out by Davies *et al.* (2008) found that portfolios seemed to be highly appreciated by the students for two major reasons. Firstly, they thought that they gave a them better idea of exactly what was expected and secondly, they felt they gave them more control over the assessment process.

However, the use of portfolio assessments in quantitative analysis modules has been less frequent than in other disciplines, with tests and exams remaining the most common forms of assessment. The authors decided to introduce assessment by portfolio into a quantitative module, to evaluate students' quantitative skills "in action", and to see if it would have the same positive impact that it has evidently had in other subject areas. In addition, it was seen as a convenient and flexible type of assessment that could easily be adapted to suit the requirements of very different quantitative modules.

### How the intervention engages students

The portfolio submission consisted of one Excel spreadsheet file with twelve separate sheets, one for each section of the syllabus. The chosen format was an electronic portfolio, in order to enhance the computer literacy component, nowadays so essential for mastering quantitative skills. In order to prepare materials for their portfolios, the students were required to save and keep each week one part of their compulsory seminar exercises. While the correct, synthetic answers had been provided in class for learning purposes, the students have been encouraged to explore different ways to reach the same results, or to practise with other available tools, such as Excel formulas and online solvers. Toward the end of the year they had to collect all the required exercises and upload them online in a dedicated Moodle section. This final version was given a qualitative feedback and a grade as a coursework component. This solution allowed for a flexible instrument, combining both modalities of formative and summative assessment.

### Evidence of effectiveness/impact

The results since the introduction of the portfolio have been promising, in several ways. They are summarised in Table I below:

Summary of 124BSS				
	2011	%	2010	%
Number of students	359		275	
Non-submitting/non- attending students	17	5	16	6
Failed/resit	22	6	22	8
Students penalised for plagiarism	15	4	0	0
Range	95.6		95.8	
1st quartile	48.1		46	
Median	61.2		57.5	
3rd quartile	71.6		66.6	
Mean	59.4		53.7	
Standard deviation (SD, n)	17.7		21.7	

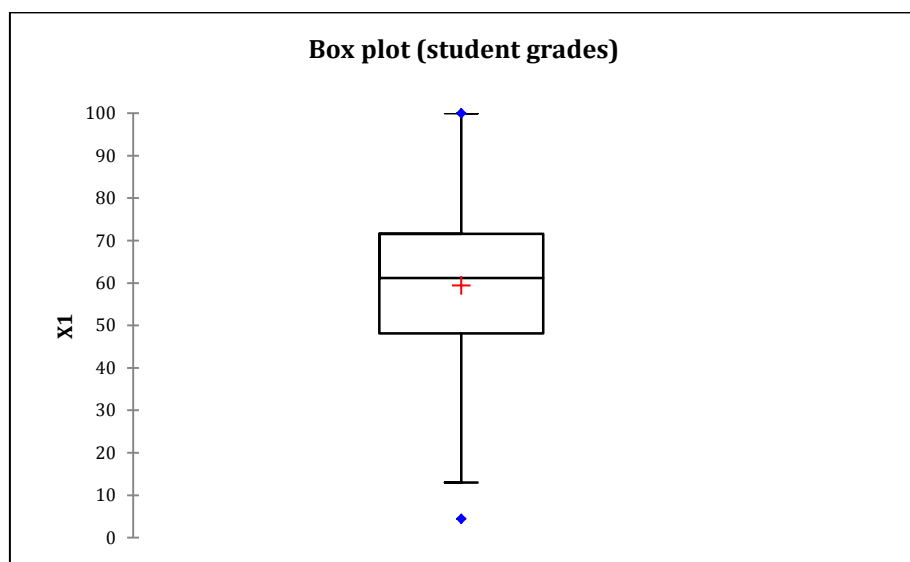
**Table I: Module results, 2011 compared to 2010**

#### The key outcomes were:

- The overall pass rate improved, from 92% to 94%. More importantly, *all students attending the three components of the coursework completed the module successfully*, apart from those students sanctioned for plagiarism.
- The average pass mark significantly improved, from 53.7% to 59.4%. The best students' results (represented by the third quartile) were also higher than in the previous year. Also, variance in student performance has fallen, resulting in a more uniform overall performance, definitively a positive result for a new assessment technique.

A chart (namely, a box plot, in Figure I below) illustrates student performance and it has been included here to show graphically the distribution of the grades, which is important in this kind of evaluation. It displays (between bottom and top) the 25th and 75th percentiles (the lower and upper quartiles) of the grades distribution, while the band near the middle of the box represents the 50th (or median, which in this case was 61.2, higher than in 2010).

The chart shows that the majority of the grades are concentrated between 48 and 71, quite a good result for first-year students and substantially higher than in previous years, where the same results were between 44 and 66.



**Figure 1: Graph of 2011 student performance**

Together with higher grade results, the improvement in attendance has been significant, with an average increase of 18% compared with the seminars in the previous year. The portfolio seemed to encourage students to attend, as it was less problematic for them to complete the exercises in class with the seminar tutor than outside of normal class time. It is, incidentally, worth mentioning that no data are available for lectures (attendance is not recorded). Thus no tests can be carried out to test the hypothesis against other variables. Still, there is a feeling that the introduction of the portfolio has been a major reason for the increase in attendance – due to students' comments.

Also important was the feedback from the students themselves, as collected in the yearly module questionnaires. The module itself, rarely popular among first-year students who are often quite anxious about the topic, has received positive overall evaluations in the annual module questionnaire evaluations. More specifically, the students have evaluated positively the portfolios and the seminars because of the new format and the opportunity it provides to practise the theory learnt during the lectures. Also, obscure theoretical points have appeared clearer once performed on Excel and with the help of the seminar tutor. This was evident from comments provided in 2010 module evaluations questionnaires.

Some representative comments were:

*“Seminars have lots of activities and are explained clearly.”*

*“There is a big variety of activities during seminars.”*

*“Seminars and portfolio interesting and engaging.”*

There have been a few drawbacks, though they have not been sufficient to dissuade the module leaders from using portfolio assessment. First, there have been some cases of plagiarism – or more correctly ‘collusion’ – where students have worked together and then submitted almost identical portfolios. Up to 15 cases of “plagiarism” were identified in 2011 (about 4% of the submission). While some group work has been included, the rationale for the portfolio is that it should be an individual exercise, and therefore this practice has to be discouraged. A partial solution has been found with the introduction of group exercises, which also responds to different learning outcomes.

Another drawback is represented by the resources necessary for the exercise. Not only are a certain number of computer labs required each week but also class numbers need to be kept quite low, in order to give adequate opportunity for one-to-one discussions with the seminar tutor. While lab use is required in any quantitative module, portfolio requirements make them a constant necessity even on occasions when the week's topic does not call for it.

Finally, marking time has dramatically increased with the introduction of the portfolio, and this represents an additional strain on resources. In order to address these challenges, some actions have been considered, namely moving a part of the portfolio work online, providing feedback to students in a blended delivery setting. The shift to Moodle 2.0, which provides a more flexible, suitable, and innovative e-learning solution, has been a key factor in this arrangement.

## Conclusion

A creative way to teach and assess quantitative methods in social sciences is certainly needed, if the introduction of these tools is to be seriously pursued. Portfolio assessment has proved to be a popular instrument among both students and educators. Its novelty has produced some very positive outcomes, both in terms of academic results and student experience/satisfaction. While the drawbacks need to be taken into account, the overall benefits justify the decision to implement this method of assessment and encourage further innovation and experimentation in this direction. A suggestion for further use would be the inclusion of a wider typology of exercises (such as tests, group work, and so on) in the portfolio, together with the development of an integrated assessment with other modules in order to enhance the effectiveness and the overall results.

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# An inquiry-based approach to teaching quantitative secondary survey methods in Sociological Studies

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## Keywords

quantitative methods  
inquiry-based learning  
workbooks  
academic skills  
group work  
engagement

## Nature of intervention

The development of quantitative, secondary survey methods and research skills in the department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield through inquiry-based learning (IBL).

## Focus of intervention

The nature of the intervention is academic. It is aimed at enhancing the student experience through the application of an inquiry-based approach to quantitative research methods teaching and also contributes to students' ability to critically apply these skills in research practice.

## Description of intervention

There is a paucity of graduates within the arena of Sociological Studies who have the quantitative skills required by the social research industry (Wiles *et al.*, 2009; Wiles *et al.*, 2007; Mills *et al.*, 2005; Shaw and Norton, 2007). Indeed, many students entering our undergraduate programmes have little knowledge of maths and statistics beyond the rudimentary requirements of GCSE. This lack of quantitative skills is compounded by the paucity of genuinely accessible textbook material specific to quantitative social research and this often serves as a barrier to developing quantitative knowledge. This lack of accessible textbook material is particularly surprising given that social scientists have “a large number of high quality national surveys [that] are readily available” and “that expertise in the analysis and data management of large surveys is in great demand by employers” (Arber, 2001: 270). Whilst workbook approaches to quantitative projects are not uncommon, there is currently a chronic lack of resources that specifically relates this material to a sociological base. Therefore, by developing IBL resource materials in the form of five workbooks specifically written for students with basic numerical skills, this project aimed to enhance students' knowledge, interest and experience of working with quantitative data and secondary surveys. Unlike other support material currently available, these materials were specifically written for students with no previous statistical experience and assumed no previous knowledge. They include resources devoted to: formulating hypotheses; describing data and identifying levels of measurement; working with descriptive statistics; inferential statistics; an introduction to chi-square analysis; and an introduction to SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

Following an initial development period, the workbooks were trialled in semester one of the 2009–10 academic year with several level 2 undergraduate students. Feedback from them enabled us to refine the workbooks in accordance with their experiences. By the end of this process all the students involved in the development period commented that by undertaking the workbooks their information literacy and skill capacity had been enhanced through actively engaging with quantitative datasets. The first four workbooks were then used in the core sociological studies research methods module *Social Research Principles* which takes place in the first semester of level two. In addition to lectures on the workbook topics, students were expected to use the workbooks and required to undertake linked seminar activities. Through the incorporation of workbooks, worksheets, team-based activities and various planning exercises, the seminars were designed to give students the opportunity to be guided and managed through specific research tasks to develop their research experience in a small group setting. The seminars provided a learning space for the students to enhance their understanding of research concepts and instruments whilst developing an understanding of their use in the practice of research. In essence, they allow students to progress from knowing *that* to knowing *how*. Learning objectives were then assessed in the form of an exam-style quiz that specifically interrogated areas incorporated in the workbooks such as developing hypotheses from research rationales, interpreting tables

and differences between types of variable. Examples of the quiz were recently requested by a former external examiner as an example of good practice to be implemented in their home department.

The Social Research Skills module is undertaken by students in the second semester of level 2. The module builds on principles and knowledge developed in the first-semester module and students complete the fifth and final workbook on how to use SPSS. The skills they develop through undertaking this final workbook and its associated activities in staff-supported workshops suitably prepare them for the assessment exercise. This involves a poster presentation of the findings of a team-based quantitative project that uses a national dataset of their choosing (such as the Health Survey for England, the General Household Survey, the Labour Force Survey and the British Crime Survey). The inquiry-based structure gives students the opportunity to receive formative feedback as they proceed through the research process towards their summative assessments.

These workbooks and the associated teaching methods provide students with the necessary capabilities and confidence to undertake quantitative dissertations in their final year. This is evidenced by the increase in quantitative dissertations undertaken in 2011–12.

### **How the intervention engages students**

Prior to the introduction of the quantitative workbooks, no attention was given to the analysis of secondary surveys within the undergraduate programme and students did not get the opportunity to experience the use of SPSS in a staff-supported inquiry-based manner. While it will always be a challenge to suitably engage all students with quantitative analysis it is evident from student feedback that, on the whole, the introduction of the workbooks and greater emphasis on quantitative methods and IBL has proved popular. By utilising small group teaching methods, lectures and individual and group work, the methods employed were suited to a variety of different learning styles and therefore enhanced the likelihood of engagement with the principles and skills necessary for quantitative research. In particular, the opportunity to undertake team-based quantitative projects employing large scale datasets on a topic of the students' choice enabled them to develop a particular area of interest whilst also gaining practical experience of quantitative research design and analysis.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

The development and use of the quantitative workbooks through a process of inquiry-based learning conforms to a number of the What Works? principles. For instance, it was evident that the curriculum content embedded within the workbooks and associated tasks clearly motivated students to engage pro-actively with quantitative research. Students were engaged in practice-based learning and were able to draw on the real world data to produce social policy and sociology research in areas that are relevant to their areas of interest. This matches the What Works? finding that 'activities need to be informative, useful and relevant to students' current interests and future aspirations'. This approach led to a plethora of high-quality assessment outputs in the research methods modules and some excellent quantitative dissertations in their final year – showing that students were explicitly aware of the potential benefits of engaging in secondary analysis. There can be little doubt that the quantitative skills students have developed will enhance the students' future employability and, upon graduating, one student was even offered a graduate job in a supermarket chain analysing sales data using the skills she developed on the module – something that would have been unimaginable before the workbooks were introduced.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

In order to explore the effectiveness and impact of the use of the workbooks a number of quantitative and qualitative processes were employed.

Following a development period, a group of students who had little quantitative experience over and above GCSE level were asked to participate in a trial of the workbooks and were interviewed about their experiences. They completed the five workbooks and answered a number of questions about them in written form. These related to the structure and content of the workbooks including areas for development and how they could be introduced into teaching. The overarching aim of the qualitative feedback was to assess to what extent they felt they would enhance students' knowledge, interest and experience of quantitative methods in sociological research. In addition, a qualitative focus group involving the project leaders and students who completed the workbooks was conducted. The students involved all commented that they felt much more confident in undertaking the quantitative analysis of secondary data sets. In addition, they confirmed they would be able to undertake further quantitative IBL as a result of using the workbooks. One participant described them as "interesting and helpful" – a common conclusion in subsequent feedback. Indeed, many commented on their "new found" quantitative skills as a result of completing the workbooks and were surprised at how little time they took to complete. In addition, the students also felt the opportunity to be involved in the development of module content was valuable: "I wish we could have this kind of involvement in the development of other modules", one student said. This detailed feedback enabled us to develop the workbooks in more depth and with greater confidence in their suitability.

The workbooks were then embedded within the Social Research Principles and Social Research Skills modules in 2010–11 and 2011–12. Quantitative evaluation of both modules subsequently revealed that over 95% of students who completed the course were positive about the quality of the resources provided within the modules and similarly over 95% of students would



recommend them to other students. There were a number of positive references to the workbooks and quantitative teaching in the more substantive qualitative feedback too. In particular the feedback emphasised the increase in confidence the quantitative workbooks had provided. “I would feel confident in undertaking a quantitative project now”, one student remarked. Another commented that they were “really useful and written in an easy to understand style”. It was also evident from the feedback that the associated assessments and activities were clear and enhanced knowledge and skills. This is in contrast to module feedback received prior to the introduction of the IBL quantitative resources which indicated that some students felt that on completion they still “lack[ed] confidence in the practical application of quantitative skills”. Indeed, further evidence of their effectiveness can be seen through the level of assessed work produced, which was generally excellent (2:1 and above) and also the increased number of quantitative dissertations being undertaken, these having more than doubled since the introduction of the IBL quantitative workbooks.

## Conclusion

The introduction of the quantitative workbooks has undoubtedly enhanced students’ quantitative skills in the Department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield. These skills can then be put into practice in subsequent dissertations and employment. A number of good-practice recommendations may be made following this project. Firstly, it is important not to assume that undergraduate students in the social sciences already possess statistical skills. Students need to be reminded of the basics and taken through quantitative skills on a step-by-step basis. Secondly, the use of relevant examples and IBL strategies are crucial in enhancing students’ interest, knowledge and skills in quantitative methods. This should take students beyond knowing *that* to knowing *how*. Finally, the use of students in the development of the workbooks allowed us to see “what works” and, importantly, “what doesn’t work” before rolling out the IBL workbooks to the rest of the students. Although there will be a need to update the resources on a regular basis, they form the foundation on which to build additional IBL resources for students in social research methods. This is crucial in continuing to enhance students’ skills and knowledge.

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# Sharing experience, educating and empowering students: The relevance of the General Studies Programme at Bowen University, Iwo, Nigeria

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## Keywords

- experience
- education
- empowerment
- self-reliance
- development
- intervention

## Nature of intervention

The goal of the study was to examine the perceptions, knowledge, attitudes and skills associated with the teaching of the General Studies Programme (GSP), a compulsory course in Nigerian universities. Moreover, providing undergraduate students with comprehensive and qualitative education has been the primary concern of the National University Commission (NUC), a regulatory body for Nigerian universities. Specifically, the GSP is designed to help students develop adequate competence in the use of English language as a tool for their studies and effective means of communication in society (University of Ibadan, GSP, 2008). Since 2002 there has been a continual increase in the number of GSP courses taught in Bowen University, Iwo. This was informed by the fact that the GSP is seen as an effective medium for providing information to the students on critical issues of existence, knowledge, culture, environment and development. Thus, the graduates of the university would be expected to function better in their future employment.

## Focus of intervention

Given the philosophy and objectives of the GSP at Bowen University is “to give students a broad based knowledge on various disciplines with a view to inculcating in them general intellectual skills that will complement their major areas of study”, the study conducted specifically chooses to focus on students’ perceptions of and attitudes towards the relevance of the GSP courses in Bowen University. The study explored the dynamics of empowering the students on self-reliance and capacity-building through liberal education across different disciplines in the six faculties of the university. The study also examined the teaching skills and attitudes of the GSP teachers in the classroom discussions. Over the years the GSP has had a fundamental impact on the academic and social life of students in Nigeria. Thus, the nature of the intervention is both academic and social.

## Description of intervention

Aimed at broadening each student's knowledge and outlook, the GSP comprises nine courses, offered at three different levels within the university. The content of, and accreditation for, each level is illustrated in Table 1:

Course level	Number of courses	Title and number of credits for each course
100 level	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• GSP 110 Use of English and Communication Skills, 2 credits</li><li>• GSP 113 Christian Education, 2 credits</li><li>• GSP 123 Introduction to Library and Information Literacy Skills, 2 credits</li></ul>
200 level	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• GSP 201 Studies in Entrepreneurship and New Ventures, 2 credits</li><li>• GSP 216 History and Philosophy of Science, 1 credit</li><li>• GSP 228 Peace Studies and Conflict resolution, 2 credits</li></ul>
300 level	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• GSP 301 Culture and Civilization in Africa, 1 credit</li><li>• GSP 302 Studies in Philosophy and Logic, 1 credit</li></ul>

**Table 1: General Studies Programme: Content and accreditation**

### How the intervention engages the students

GSP courses are expected to provide an integrated quality assurance service for the higher education system (Urah, 2007). Hence, it is a university requirement that the General Studies Programme should be successfully completed before a student is awarded a degree. Student engagement is achieved through traditional lectures, continuous assessment and examinations. Student feedback is used to promote and develop the programme.

### Link to What Works? findings

The General Studies Programme is designed and modelled as a channel through which the university develops and expands students' knowledge and competence in higher education qualifications. The knowledge acquired from the GSP aims to assist students in building self-reliance for their post-university life. It empowers students by providing them with innovative ideals for job creation, improved entrepreneurial skills and by enabling them to develop managerial skills.

The GSP provides students with insightful knowledge into all spheres of life, including academic, professional and social. This is reflective of arguments that university education is crucial to achieving social mobility (King, 2012). Indeed, it is important that higher education should go well beyond the conventional curriculum and provide students with a wide range of transferable skills such as those prescribed in the GSP curriculum. In this sense, sharing experience through the GSP will lead to "what works".

The proactive and timely nature of the GSP acts to ultimately instigate a sense of belonging to the academic community in the students; in doing so it maximises the potential for students' retention and success (Joanne Smalier, 2012). Experience has shown that the aim and objectives of the GSP enable a capacity building mechanism at the university level; this in itself improves the potential for students to achieve academic success.

### Evidence of effectiveness/impact

The impact of the GSP on the academic needs of students within Bowen University was evaluated using a mixed methodological approach across six faculties: Agriculture; Basic Medical Sciences; Humanities; Law; Science and Science Education; and Social and Management Sciences. The aim of the study was to enhance students' understanding of the relevance of the GSP in capacity-building.

A self-administered questionnaire was given to 135 GSP students from across all three levels. Eighteen lecturers also completed a questionnaire. The student questionnaire aimed to measure students' perceptions of the quality and quantity of teaching; it also examined the patterns of communication in the class. A similar approach was adopted to measure the

lecturers' perceptions of students' knowledge. Outcomes, including those relating to student retention and success, were documented through classroom/lecture observations.

Of the students who responded, 65% agreed that the GSP has enhanced their academic performance in their disciplines. Although 5% claimed that GSP courses were an additional burden to their course workload and 30% declined to answer, looking at the data as a whole it may be argued that the GSP can empower and enhance the students' learning in higher institutions.

The study revealed that 80% of the lecturers were qualified to teach the GSP at all levels, although 20% did not have sufficient experience to provide qualitative teaching in certain subject areas, for example, GSP 110 Use of English and Communication Skills and GSP 123 Introduction to Library and Information Literacy Skills respectively.

With regard to the students, the research findings showed that the GSP acts to help students develop an awareness of the world outside them.

The study revealed that from 2009 to 2012, the total number of students who registered for the GSP, across all levels, was 5,000. Of those, 90% successfully graduated (apparently benefitting from the programme). Although students and lecturers differed in their perceptions of "what works", the general conception is that the GSP is necessary and useful in higher education.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, findings from the study showed that the GSP is well accepted by the majority of students and lecturers. Moreover, it helps to mitigate culture differences between students from different ethnic backgrounds.

Taking the study findings into account, the following recommendations are made:

- there is a need to identify and reinforce its relevance to students in terms of their awareness of the social, cultural and environmental benefits of the programme;
- there is a need to confront stakeholders in higher education with an obligation to recognise the relevance of GSP to national development; and
- from the viewpoint of the students, the GSP should be updated with intensive, practical and skill-oriented courses.

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# Using role emerging placements to enhance engagement and employability in Occupational Therapy education

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## Keywords

- student engagement
- role emerging placements
- occupational therapy
- entrepreneurial practice

## Nature of intervention

Developing placement opportunities within non-traditional areas of practice. This aims to enhance student experience and promote greater potential for employability of Cardiff University occupational therapy students through autonomous skill development.

## Focus of intervention

This intervention is aimed at both enhancing the clinical experiences encountered by students and developing and improving entrepreneurial areas for future occupational therapy (OT) practice.

## Description of intervention

The main aim of occupational therapy education is to ensure that graduates are fit for award, practice and profession. It is also important for the curriculum to reflect unique local and national needs and priorities together with changes to health, social care and occupational drivers (COT 2008).

In 2004, the Practice Education Team at Cardiff University, along with colleagues in Bangor University and Glyndŵr University (formally North East Wales Institute) were pioneers in developing innovative opportunities for Occupational Therapy students to develop their professional skills and enhance employability and the development of entrepreneurial skills through the development of role emerging placements. This innovative approach to practice education continues to be developed and has accessed a number of exciting learning opportunities within a range of third sector and non-traditional settings.

The term “role emerging” relates to placements in non-statutory settings with no established occupational therapy service (Cooper and Raine, 2009; College of Occupational Therapists, 2006). The students work within an allocated organisation to identify a potential role for occupational therapy and develop an occupationally focused project for the duration of their placement. Examples of organisations where students have been placed include young people’s charities, learning disabilities workshops, residential homes for the elderly and community development charities (Tarasconi and Griffiths, 2010; Skladanowska and Radziwill, 2010; Williams, 2009; Pym and Russell, 2008).

Role emerging placements can take a “bottom-up” approach to promoting occupational therapy in new and innovative areas of practice while students learn about the value of occupation by applying theoretical concepts to practice (Treseder, 2012). The World Federation of Occupational Therapists (Hocking and Ness, 2002) has acknowledged the importance of students experiencing a depth and breadth of experience in their placements and the College of Occupational Therapists (2006) has responded to the development in role emerging placements by publishing guidelines for students, higher education providers and service providers in the effective implementation of these placements.

Whilst on any placement, the student must have some form of clinical supervision from a registered occupational therapist even though the registered therapist doesn’t necessarily need to be on site (Hocking and Ness, 2002; College of Occupational Therapists, 2007). Models of supervision on role emerging placements take several forms. One of the most common is the tripartite arrangement between student, on-site supervisor and long-arm supervisor: the student will receive ongoing support from the on-site supervisor who will not be an occupational therapist, but provides the support and supervision required for management/organisational issues. They will be the first point of contact for the student whilst on placement, and contribute

to the assessment process throughout. The long-arm supervisor may be a tutor from the student's university, or a practitioner in an area that reflects the organisation where the placement is taking place.

Although the student inevitably has less day-to-day contact with their supervisor, regular supervision time is planned, usually once a week, or once a fortnight. There may be opportunities for the supervisor to observe the student in practice, although the main focus of the supervisory relationship is on reflective practice and clinical reasoning. The long-arm supervisor will also be involved in the assessment process throughout the placement (Treseder, 2012).

In order to ensure parity and equity of learning, the assessment process is exactly the same for students who are on a traditional placement. This takes the form of a learning contract which maps across to the placement setting whilst reflecting generic learning outcomes that need to be achieved. This allows the student some flexibility in identifying their personal learning needs within a non-traditional environment, whilst ensuring equity in ensuring that the specified university's learning outcomes have been met.

### **How the intervention engages students**

Students who have had an opportunity to complete these innovative and entrepreneurial placements have identified it as an invaluable learning experience. Evidence suggests that students develop significantly in their professional identity and confidence because of the level of autonomy they are given within a role emerging placement (Cooper and Raine, 2009; Wood, 2005). Although initially daunting not to have a practice educator on site, the lack of directive support has required students to take ownership of their practice and learning in a new way, which serves to contribute to future employability; on graduating, these students have been able to secure employment in new and exciting areas of practice, including a child and adolescent mental health primary care team and care and repair.

Students have recently engaged in small-scale research projects evaluating the experience and impact of role emerging placements. This has enabled students to make closer links between occupational therapy theory and practice, and staff to build the processes for placement development and supervision. A need has now emerged for the creation of a special interest group to offer mentorship and support continuing professional development. Discussions are currently underway to take this forward.

### **Link to What Works? findings**

Role emerging placements are compatible with the What Works? model in putting student engagement and belonging at the heart of improving student retention and success. They provide a unique opportunity for the student to engage in a deeper debate about the future of the profession by applying their academic learning to a new and innovative role. This depth of engagement provides a sense of ownership of the profession, its future, and a depth of learning in relation to this. Engagement in the academic sphere is thus nurtured and encouraged.

The capacity of staff and students to engage is also being developed. The Practice Education Team in Wales is intending exponential growth through the introduction of a whole cohort model as a final placement. This runs parallel to the development of more practitioners to provide the long-arm supervision.

At a senior and institutional level, the College of Occupational Therapists (COT, 2009) acknowledges the need for the acquisition of entrepreneurial skills in ensuring engagement with the profession and retention of students. Role emerging placements provide valuable opportunities for students to become pioneers of the future, exploring new and emerging areas of practice, leading the profession firmly into the 21st century.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

There is growing evidence of the effectiveness of role emerging placements within occupational therapy education, locally (Cooper, 2006a; Cooper, 2006b; Cooper and Raine, 2007; Cooper and Raine, 2009; Seymour, 2010; Treseder and Burchett, 2012a; Treseder, 2012; Boniface *et al.*, 2012), nationally (Thew *et al.*, 2008; Overton *et al.*, 2009) and internationally (Adamson, 2005; Thomas *et al.*, 2005; Friedland *et al.*, 2001).

Students who have completed a role emerging placement frequently achieve a distinction award (which reflects excellence in practice) because of their practice at a standard above that expected for the level of study. Over the last five years, 54 students from across Wales have undertaken role emerging placements. Of this number, 80% (n=43) were awarded a distinction in practice education, which was well above the average number of distinctions awarded (approximately 21%).

A study undertaken by a student at Glyndŵr University (Pearson 2011) clearly demonstrates the invaluable learning achieved through actively engaging in a role emerging placement. Emerging themes were those of professional development, to include consolidation of role and opportunity to work autonomously, and personal development to include increased confidence and personal skills, as summarised in Table 1.

Theme	Category	Codes
<b>Professional development</b>	Consolidate understanding of role and purpose of OT	<p>"It helped me to get my head around the role of OT and confirmed my own understanding."</p> <p>"I was able to link classroom theory with placement and consolidate my own understanding of OT."</p> <p>"I was able to distinguish between my role and the other team members."</p> <p>'It really makes you think about the purpose of OT and your role.'</p>
	Opportunity to work autonomously and be self directed	<p>"I was able to be creative and direct my own learning."</p> <p>"I had the opportunity to develop my own ideas."</p> <p>"I could take ownership of my own learning."</p> <p>"Having complete autonomy and being self directed was a great benefit of this placement."</p> <p>"Freedom to develop OT service."</p>
	Other skills	<p>"I do think that I gained many skills that will undoubtedly inform my practice."</p>
	Potential impact on future career	<p>"I found this placement to be so inspiring that I would now consider a post within a team which does not have occupational therapy in it."</p> <p>"It has challenged my perspective of my career, ideally I would like to work in an unconventional setting . . . and would love to set up independently."</p> <p>"It has allowed me to be open minded to options which are available to me when I qualify, outside the traditional hospital settings."</p> <p>"Yes, because I was able to identify how an OT [occupational therapist] would fit into this setting."</p>
<b>Personal development</b>	Increased confidence	<p>"it has been a real boost to my confidence"</p> <p>"needing to advocate for the profession really increased my confidence"</p> <p>"developed my confidence through being a lone profession"</p> <p>"increased confidence in my abilities"</p>
	Increased personal skills	<p>"increased my communication, organisational and therapeutic skills"</p> <p>"I really developed my skills in clinical reasoning/evidence based practice"</p> <p>"has helped towards our ongoing professional and personal development"</p>

**Table 1: Analysis of student learning (Pearson, 2011)**

## Conclusion

The overall benefits of engaging students in these exciting and innovative practice learning opportunities serves to create a sense of engagement and empowerment for the student. The ability to engender feelings of value and responsibility amongst students (Flecky and Gitlow, 2011) can be heightened through the level of autonomy experienced by being able to make a difference and feel valued within their pre-registration professional roles. The importance of enabling students to work as partners within the arena of emerging areas of practice should be acknowledged and will allow them to feel valued through their active participation in identifying and sustaining entrepreneurial areas of practice for the future.

The result of the evidence that has been developed so far has served to engage a higher volume of students and practitioners in the development of role emerging placements. It has also been given a national platform at the College of Occupational Therapists conference in 2012 where a debate about development into emerging areas of practice was facilitated. There remain further developments and recommendations for practice:

for more universities to consider the introduction of using role emerging placements within their practice education modules; for more practitioners to be encouraged to undertake long-arm supervision in order to build capacity in developing the placements, whilst addressing their own continuing professional development; further research to be undertaken into all areas of emerging practice in occupational therapy in order to build evidence of the effectiveness of these placements; the development of a community/special interest group that may provide additional support for students and practitioners in emerging areas of practice.

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# The use of Feedforward to support success and retention of students in higher education

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## Keywords

- Feedforward
- feedback
- retention
- assessment
- student engagement
- student success

## Nature of intervention

In a nutshell, *Feedforward* is a simple project whereby new students on the Glyndŵr University pre-registration nursing programme are offered an opportunity to submit a 500-word draft of their first assessment for feedback.

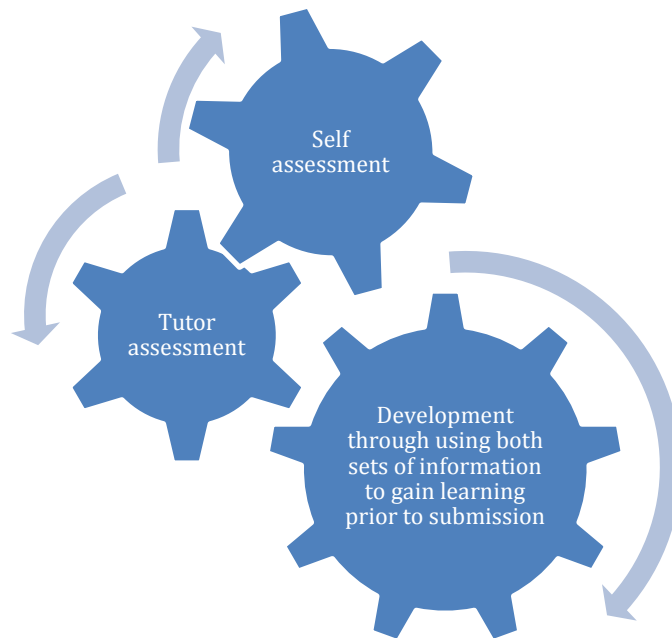
## Focus of intervention

The heart of this project is encouraging students to make the connection between assessment, feedback and learning. It also manages student transition from further education (FE) to higher education (HE).

## Description of intervention

This project keeps to a tight time frame to ensure the students engage with their first assessment from the first week of starting the programme. It is designed to promote learning as students have a deadline to complete a section of their assignment, carry out a self-evaluation via a draft checklist and also get written feedback from the tutor on their writing, as illustrated in Figure 1. This time schedule needs to be structured to allow students time to reflect on the tutor's comments and act upon suggestions prior to their submission date. The timeline of when to submit their draft in order to receive written feedback on how to improve their work and a projected mark is illustrated in Figure 2. This project also ensures that students submit their draft via the virtual learning environment (VLE) Moodle, which provides students with an opportunity to practise submitting their work electronically prior to their actual submission date.

Students are given a structured timeline of when to submit their draft so they can receive practical written feedback on how to improve their work. They also receive a projected mark to give them information on how to close the gap between their actual and their required (or desired) performance.



**Figure 1: How assessment and feedback (as Feedforward) impact upon student learning**

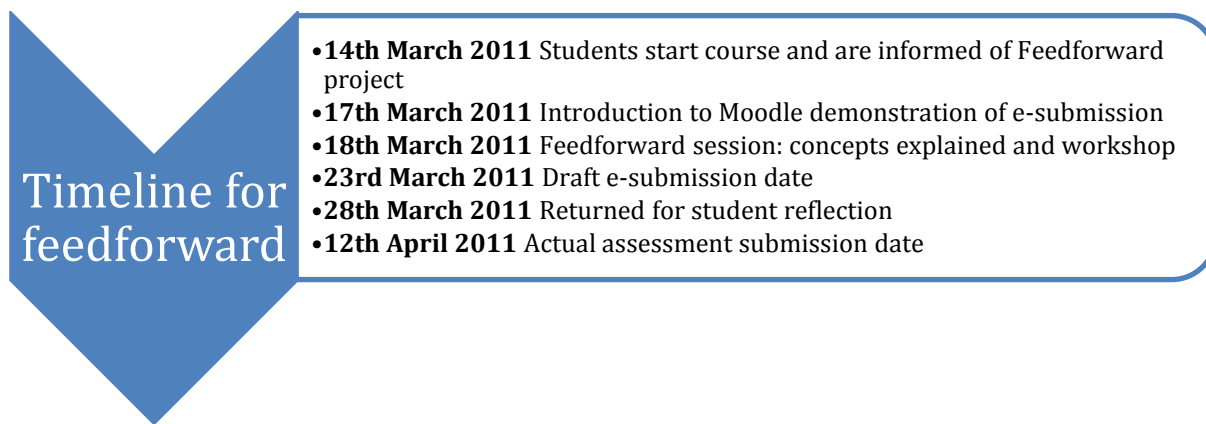
Projects promoting student success need to be aimed at the entire student population, not just those with learning differences. At Glyndŵr University (Glyndŵr University 2011–12 and 2013–14), 19.8% of the entire student body disclosed a disability, however in nursing this figure is much higher. The pre-registration nursing periodic review (Glyndŵr University 2011) records that 35% of pre-registration nursing students receive Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) with most of them reporting dyslexia. This project was designed as a teaching and learning strategy that identified learning needs early and therefore helped to address diversity within the student population. Like any good teaching and learning strategy, planning for the diversity of students helps to enhance the learning for all students. Feedforward was designed to help all students feel more confident about the transition from one level of study to another; in this case it was from level 3 to level 4.

Feedforward aims to develop students academically by pursuing two main goals. These are:

- to reduce student attrition and promote retention by engaging students in study from the first week of the programme;
- to engage students in using feedback to facilitate their success and therefore promote learning.

As the students worked within an extremely tight time frame, procrastination was reduced as there was no opportunity for students to postpone starting work on their draft. This also encouraged early engagement with the module tutor. Students engaged with each other and the lecturer in the Feedforward forum in the VLE. They also started sending emails about the project and asking questions in lectures about their drafts.

Another important proactive element of this work was that it gave the tutor the opportunity to assess any students who needed support services before they had submitted and possibly failed an assignment. Any student who received a projected score of 45 or below was asked to make an appointment with the study skills tutors and any who appeared to particularly struggle were advised to seek out a learning needs assessment. Burke (2011) identified that often it is only the most able students who return to collect their annotated assessments and actively seek further feedback. She also found that out of the marked assessments that were not collected by students, nearly two thirds of these were *failed* assignments. Therefore, it appears that it is the very students who most *need* feedback who were the *least* likely to access it or use it. Feedforward helped less able students to see that they could affect their own marks if they used feedback constructively. The project did not just target those students who struggle; all students whatever their current academic ability were encouraged to use feedback to develop their learning and become more successful.



**Figure 2: Timeline for Feedforward**

### How the intervention engages students

In order to increase the students' chances of success on the pre-registration nursing programme, the project stressed the importance of students engaging with all feedback from day one. More than that, the project helped the students to make sense of the feedback given. Every draft was annotated by the tutor with advice on how to improve the writing on a draft of their assignment before summative submission. Hattie and Timperley (2007) state that feedback is essential to learning. Despite knowing how crucial feedback is within the learning process, Weaver (2006) found that educationalists spend little time explaining this to students. She found that 75% of students receive no guidance on *how* to use feedback prior to entering HE. Hattie and Timperley (2007) also found that 50% receive no guidance on how to engage with feedback while they attend HE. They propose that feedback impacts upon learning when it meets three specific criteria. They suggest a framework of feedback that firstly focuses on the goals of learning, secondly assesses what if any progress is being made towards those goals, and thirdly gives information to the student about what they can do to develop their own work. Burke (2011) supports this, stating that although feedback is assumed to improve learning, it only does so if students know what to do with it. Her findings suggest that many students in HE still do not use feedback or know what to do with it in order to progress their learning.

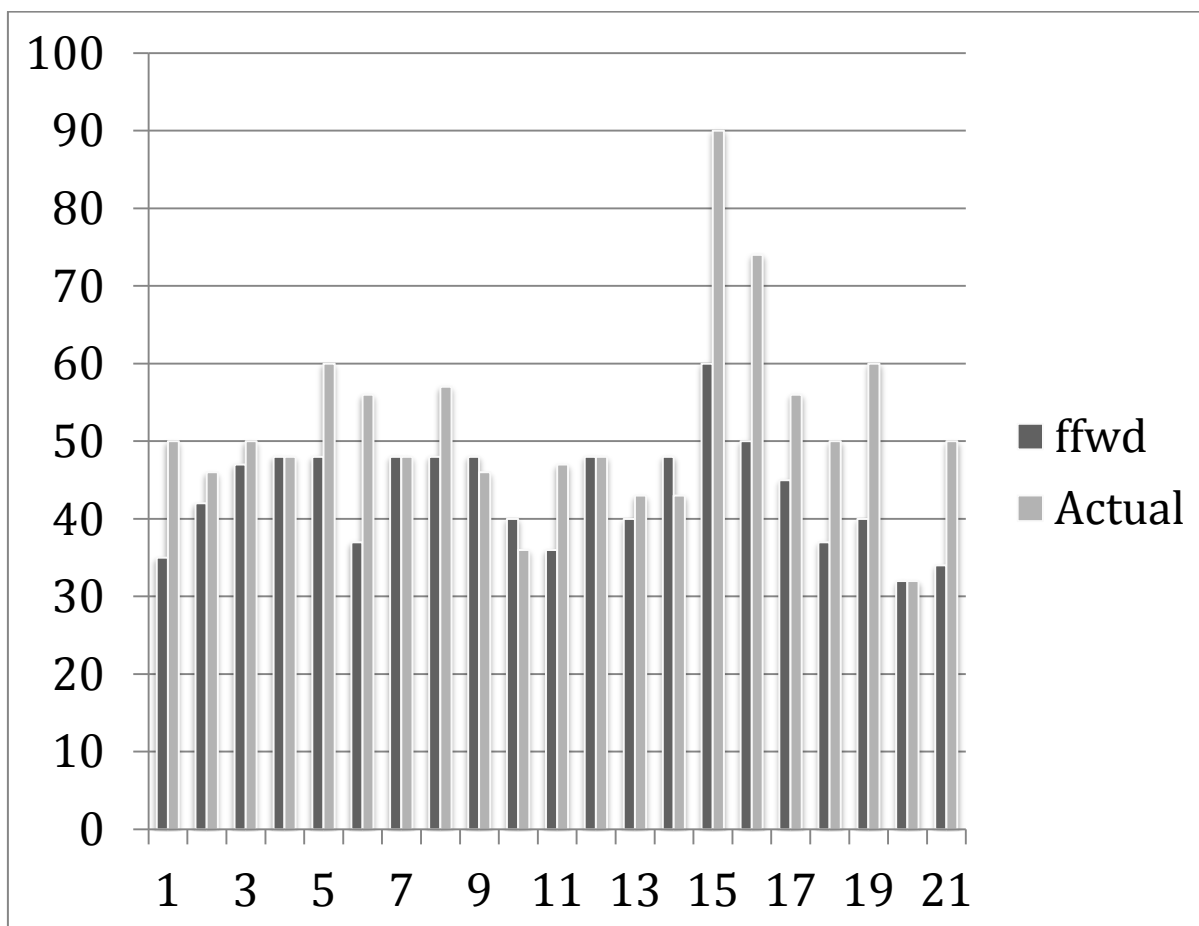
Unfortunately, written feedback is often only presented to students at the end of a module of study, when the student is expected to apply the concepts learned from one module's feedback to a new module with different concepts. The Feedforward project provides students with an opportunity to use written feedback and improve their work prior to the final submission. It also gives them a projected mark so that they can measure any progress from draft to actual submission. Students can feel passive about feedback as it highlights mistakes or problems at a time when they cannot do anything about it. It would appear more beneficial to students if they were offered sound advice on what they did well and how to put things right prior to summative assessment.

Students can affect their own mark before the summative submission if they engage in Feedforward and use the feedback. Unlike most feedback, it is not given at the end of the module. Feedforward is provided with sufficient time for the student to increase their chance of success. They can move from passive to active participants in the feedback cycle.

There is also an opportunity for students to practise submitting their work electronically via Moodle as part of the Feedforward process. Electronic submission of assignments is likely to be something most students have not done prior to university, so this is a valuable opportunity to practise a new skill, pre-empting possible errors. This will give the students confidence and reduce stress when the time for the real submission comes around.

### Evidence of impact/effectiveness

Most of the students improved their work. This can be measured by plotting their projected *Feedforward* mark and comparing it to the actual mark, shown in Figure 3. The graph shows that 15 students out of 21 who participated improved their marks by up to 10%. The marks of four students did not alter throughout the project and two scored less on the actual mark than on the projected mark from Feedforward.



**Figure 3: Feedforward marks versus actual marks for assessment**

The most significant impact from my perspective is the response from the students themselves. They stated the following in response to the question “What have you learned from the Feedforward project?”:

*“If found that the feedback emphasised the good and not so good parts of the work so that adjustments to the work are made with confidence.”*

*“I would highly recommend the Feedforward exercise I don’t think that I would have passed first time without using it. It was a great way to see what standard our work needed to be at, and how we could achieve that standard.”*

*“How to set my references out and how to write in the correct manner, and it also put me at ease that I wasn’t doing it wrong.”*

*“Yes I learned from it. The feedback I had I took into account and improved my assignment.”*

*“To reference properly and effectively.”*

*“It was very useful to get an appreciation of how our work would be marked, especially as it was our first assignment.”*

*“By submitting a draft the feedback helped me to go into more depth with my assignment.”*

*“That I hadn’t read around the subject enough and needed to work on referencing.”*

This project has had extremely positive reviews from students and our attrition rate has changed from 21% in 2007 (which was the highest in Wales) to 13% in 2010 (the lowest in Wales). Coupled with the reduction in students leaving, Glyndŵr University pre-registration has the highest retention rate in Wales. The nursing subject area has scored higher than any other nursing school in Wales over the last two years for student satisfaction and although Feedforward is only one of a number of interventions aimed at promoting retention it is undoubtedly significant in dealing with the attrition problem.

## Conclusion

The project intended to engage students from the start of the course. As a proactive measure it aimed to create a links for the students between active engagement with the assessment process and success in learning. Students appear to understand the links between assessment and learning and the majority appeared to benefit from having feedback as they moved their marks

up by between 5% and 10%. Most students can take the comments and transfer them to inform the rest of their work. It is still interesting that some students do not appear to know what to do with written feedback. A minority of students who engage with the project do not improve their mark and the occasional student scores less on the final submission. Further investigation is required on how tutors feed back information to students and perhaps how the use of methods such as audio or face-to-face feedback may help guide these learners in a more productive way. The project itself was well evaluated by students and they often ask for this type of exercise when they move from one level to another, so perhaps the true value of this work lies in reassuring students when they are in transition from one level to another.

It was surprising how many students engaged from the start with Feedforward. Currently, there is a 100% uptake of the project. The students recognise that this is additional work and appear to view it as a worthwhile exercise. This is partly due to existing students stating the benefits they received from Feedforward and partly because it is presented as a valuable additional service they can engage with if they choose to. The main difficulty in starting the project was finding the balance between asking students to write about a topic in relation to their assignment early enough to ensure they had useful feedback and involving them in sufficient teaching and learning so they had something to write about. The main lesson learned is to have a tight time frame and to stick to it.

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# Swansea University Department of Criminology: Engaging students through responsive, reflective, diverse and aligned learning and teaching

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## Keywords

- alignment
- engagement
- student
- reflective
- diverse;
- feedback

## Nature of intervention

Using feedback mechanisms to enhance undergraduate student engagement in Criminology at Swansea University

## Focus of intervention

The intervention is academic and aims to enhance the student experience and improve practice.

## Description of intervention

The Department of Criminology at Swansea University has embedded a teaching intervention within the undergraduate programme that prioritises student engagement.

The student engagement intervention is modelled and delivered through a series of co-ordinated processes, including detailed academic and social engagement with the student body, consolidated by the alignment of and reflection on programme delivery following student feedback. Intervention success is predicated on the breadth and depth of student engagement by all teaching staff across the programme, rather than confining engagement to specific students and specific staff at specific teaching levels (more common in similar programmes nationally). Part of the intervention's success is also due its reflective, innovative and proactive nature as it builds on organisational coherence and the strengths of experienced teaching staff. Consequently, programme development is engendered through diverse and flexible student engagement-facing learning, teaching and assessment strategies. This is developed through ongoing processes of student participation and feedback, professional reflection, dialogue with external examiners and consultation with expert colleagues (for example, within the Higher Education Academy and British Society of Criminology [BSC] Learning and Teaching Network). The innovative nature (breadth and depth) of engagement and reflection across the programme has been evaluated favourably by external experts, who have praised Criminology at Swansea for:

*“continuing to push the boundaries of Criminology . . . [and promoting the] positive learning experience of students”* (National Award for Teaching Excellence Panel 2012)

The engagement-focused Criminology learning/teaching intervention is delivered through traditional classroom-based lecture and seminar, complemented by intensive, day-long, activity-based workshops, online seminars in interactive discussion forums, independent group/individual projects (co-ordinated by expert supervisory staff), applied research activities conducted on/off campus, and academic/professional development/training (for example, employability talks and training, careers fairs, student rep. training, study skills activities). Assessment methods are similarly engagement focused, having evolved to reflect student and university demands for diversity and flexibility, whilst maintaining teaching quality. Accordingly, traditional essays and exams are complemented by group and individual presentations, reports and portfolios, individual research proposals, book reports, CV development, and short answer concept definition activities.

The modularisation of higher education curricula, accompanied by an exponential rise in student numbers and diversity (socio-economic, educational, cultural) has placed intense pressure on academic staff to provide engaging and meaningful assessment

feedback tailored to students' unique learning styles in a short timeframe (Case, 2007; see also Gibbs *et al.*, 2003). Therefore, a notable strength of the Department of Criminology's diverse, engagement-facing learning, teaching and assessment intervention package is the alignment between explicit, level-specific assessment criteria and a comprehensive, constructive and strictly timetabled marking (including second marking and external moderation) and feedback process designed to enhance engagement (in conjunction with dedicated tutorial sessions to review feedback) and facilitate academic development (Case, 2007). Summative assessment feedback and early formative feedback is used to promote engagement with learning and teaching, motivate students to improve, facilitate reflection and self-evaluation, and highlight areas in need of remediation with tutor support (Case, 2007). The Department of Criminology has developed an engaging, systematic and meaningful programme of assessment and feedback, embedded within an adaptive curriculum that is responsive to expressed student needs and sensitive to the student experience (Spence and Lenze, 2001).

Engagement-focused learning, teaching and assessment intervention in the Department of Criminology has been founded on evaluation mechanisms, including regular student feedback (for example, from module evaluations, student–staff committees, tutorials, the National Student Survey [NSS], the SES). In particular, feedback from students (and external examiners) has guided, shaped and led directly to programme developments, notably a review and reorientation of programme structure to provide explicit coherence and logical academic progression to students across levels, with each level retaining an internal identity: *Introducing Criminology* (level one), *Applying Criminology* (level two) and *Advancing Criminology* (level three). Additionally, structural changes have been implemented following feedback from student representatives and the NSS, including increased (doubled) contact hours, more streamlined timetabling of learning sessions and assessments, enhanced tutoring provision, expanded assessment feedback mechanisms, increased teaching focus on employability (for example, a bespoke Careers module, an employability officer) and more robust quality assurance mechanisms (for example, peer observations, moderation exercises) for all teaching staff (Case, 2012).

There are inevitably challenges to be addressed within a responsive, reflective student engagement intervention. Student expectations must consistently be identified, managed and reconciled with institutional and departmental priorities (for example, retention), policies (for example, regarding learning, teaching and assessment) and practicalities (for example, staffing levels, resource issues, financial restrictions). Similarly, perspectives, experiences and expectations may differ or fluctuate within and between student groups (for example, at different levels) and teaching staff, so these tensions must also be identified, managed and reconciled. Expectations and tensions are issues, not obstacles, for an effective student engagement intervention. Both are tackled at Swansea through explicit, embedded and evaluative engagement processes that promote effective partnership between students and staff as a means of guiding programme development.

### **How the intervention engages students**

Student engagement (academic and social) and intervention success is pursued through a series of feedback mechanisms that enable programme development through student–staff partnerships:

**Student consultation/participation.** A twice-termly staff–student committee (SSC) discusses academic, organisational and pastoral issues, and has developed its own student representative role descriptors. The student-led Criminology Society engenders strong student–staff relationships through regular social events, while a buddy scheme partners experienced and new undergraduates to aid transitions into university life and undergraduate study. A student engagement project monitors and evaluates programme changes, led by undergraduate “research assistants” on work placement with staff.

**Study support.** A personal tutorial policy enables students to use formative/summative feedback, while addressing study skills and understanding of syllabus content, as do office hours with module leaders and structured supervision for dissertation students. The Blackboard virtual learning environment provides vital degree, module and assessment documentation, guidance and information.

**Employability.** An explicit response to student feedback and institutional priorities is driven by a designated employability officer, a bespoke Careers for Criminologists module, work placements in criminal justice agencies and emphasis on transferable skills.

**Postgraduate research students.** A quality assurance programme engages postgraduates in monitoring, observation, moderation, reflection and guidance from experienced staff. A postgraduate enhancement strategy engages them in pedagogic training and meetings to share good practice and address learning/teaching/assessment issues.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

Undergraduate provision within Swansea University Criminology Department addresses each aspect of the What Works? model of student engagement and belonging. From its outset, the programme enables early engagement to promote student belonging (academic and social engagement) and this is extended across the student life cycle, through eliciting regular student consultation/feedback, a structured personal tutoring policy, a high-profile employability agenda and supporting the student-led Criminology Society and Buddy Scheme. Engagement in the academic sphere is driven by intensive study support and personal tutoring for undergraduates, teaching support for postgraduates and the alignment of all aspects of the programme (for example, learning outcomes, teaching content, transferable skills, assessment requirements). Student consultation/participation



processes such as the SSC, the Student Engagement Project and Criminology Society social events focus on developing the capacity of staff and students to engage with one another within academic and social spheres. Finally, ongoing departmental reflection and analysis of institutional data (for example, retention, progression, success) promotes institutional management and co-ordination to enhance engagement and the student experience.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

Evidence of the effectiveness and impact of programme developments is provided by quantitative statistics on student satisfaction (NSS data) and student retention and progression (Annual Performance Review data), and by formalised qualitative feedback from students, university periodic programme reviews and the BSC judging panel for the National Award for Teaching Excellence in Criminology, which the department won in 2012 (Case, 2012).

Ongoing programme development to engage students has been commended externally as “excellent . . . a further example of the team’s thorough approach” (External Examiner, 2012) and institutionally for “self-critical evaluation” and “active use of subject benchmarks and other professional standards”, alongside “clear evidence to identify and implement solutions” (Periodic Review 2009). This was reflected in large increases in student satisfaction with the programme (35%) and its teaching (23%) (NSS, 2012). This is coupled with above average (sector, institutional) increases in “good degrees” and progressions, with concurrent decreases in withdrawals and suspensions (Annual Programme Review 2012).

### **Student consultation/participation**

The department fosters close, constructive staff–student working relationships, which is evident through various sources, including:

“excellent student-centred work . . . a partnership agenda working in the classroom” (Swansea University Education Officer, 2012)

“Great atmosphere, very friendly, very welcoming. Overall, my experience has been a positive one and I’m very glad I had the privilege and opportunity to study in the Criminology Department.” (NSS, 2012)

#### *Study support*

An increase in student satisfaction with academic support (39%, NSS, 2012) identifies praise for the diversity of learning experiences within the Student Engagement Project (Case *et al.*, 2012):

*“the course structure is brilliant and gives a varied learning experience”*

*“an exceptional range of Criminology tutors, each specialise in specific topics and are helpful and inspiring”*

*“The Criminology staff have made it so easy . . . always ready to offer advice and support. I cannot recommend Criminology at Swansea highly enough.”*

These positive findings were echoed by feedback praising academic support/engagement mechanisms, including:

*“Students were very positive about their experiences and were enjoying the programme.”* (Periodic Review, 2009)

*“Tutors were very helpful and I could get the help and advice I needed.”* (NSS, 2012)

*“The feedback provided to students continues to deserve special mention . . . extremely detailed and more than I have seen elsewhere.”* (External Examiner, 2012)

### **Employability**

A 24% increase in student satisfaction with personal development elements of the programme (NSS, 2012) is consolidated by qualitative feedback that:

*“Every effort has been made to ensure that the syllabus is appropriately modern and attractive to the market.”* (Periodic Review, 2009)

*“The department is miles ahead in their focus on employability after graduation.”* (Criminology Society Chair, SSC, 2012)

#### *Postgraduate research students (PGRS) as colleagues*

Engaging postgraduate teachers through quality assurance and expert guidance is reflected by positive feedback such as:

*“I have gained fantastic teaching experience, received valuable advice and turned colleagues into friends.”* (PhD student, in Case *et al.*, 2012)

“Postgraduate seminar teachers are fantastic. Really knowledgeable, helpful and engaging.” (Student rep., SSC, 2012)

Impressive statistical improvements in performance and satisfaction, coupled with a wide range of supportive qualitative feedback, is indicative of the ongoing effectiveness of engagement processes within the Criminology programme.

## Conclusion

The success of the student engagement intervention at Swansea has been predicated on the breadth and depth of engagement processes at all stages of the undergraduate programme, the extent of critical reflection on student feedback as a means of guiding and informing programme development and the degree of explicit alignment of engagement processes with key programme elements (for example, learning outcomes, teaching methods, assessment requirements). A salient lesson here is that student engagement should not be piecemeal, but rather a comprehensive, embedded process across a whole programme, conducted in partnership between all students and all teaching staff at all undergraduate levels.

Historical and contemporary student feedback and evaluation mechanisms (both essential elements of effective engagement practice) indicate high levels of student engagement with, and participation in, the different elements of the engagement intervention at Swansea and an ongoing belief that the intervention is worthwhile, constructive and beneficial to the undergraduate learning experience. It is essential that student feedback and evaluation mechanisms (formative and summative) be embedded across teaching programmes. Ideally the mechanisms should promote voluntary, reflective and engaging partnerships between students and staff beyond those (such as the NSS) that are just summative, statutory and compelled.

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## Lecture recordings support student learning

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### Keywords

- lecture recording
- attendance
- dyslexia
- academic performance

### Nature of intervention

Evaluation of the use of supplemental lecture recordings and their impact on the academic performance of students. The study is based on the Medical Science cohort at the University of Birmingham.

### Focus of intervention

This is an academic intervention, aimed at enhancing the student experience.

### Description of intervention

The ability to generate combined audio-visual lecture recordings which can be subsequently published via a virtual learning environment (VLE) is an established technology and comprehensively used in many higher education systems. Automated lecture capture systems (echo360, Panopto) are straightforward to establish, require few adjustments for teaching staff and generate engaging, effective support materials. International studies of lecture capture show students are enthusiastic about the technology (Gosper *et al.*, 2007) and recordings are typically used in a targeted manner, for example to focus on missed lectures, update incomplete notes, and so on (Soong *et al.*, 2006). However, there have been few comparable studies in the UK.

We focused on using lecture capture as a *supplement* to lecture attendance, to evaluate the extent and mode of student use of the recordings, and their impact on academic performance. This study was based on an undergraduate BSc Medical Science programme, a relatively large (76 per year), diverse cohort, typical of many UK undergraduate cohorts in the biological sciences. In year two, the course consists of nine overlapping modules, which focus on distinct areas of biology (molecular biology, cardiovascular science, and so on) and use a similar mix of learning environments, including approximately 20 hours of lectures per module. We used the echo360 technology to record the lectures in two modules, whereas the remainder were unrecorded, allowing us to assess the impact of recordings on student attendance and exam performance. A full description of this study has been published by Leadbeater *et al.* (2013).

### Rolling out lecture capture I: establishing procedures for recording and storage

This study was performed in the context of trialling lecture capture technology on several courses, requiring procedures to record and access recordings to be established at the college level. Ideally these would encourage teaching staff to engage with the approach. As such, we introduced a simple process for facilitating lecture capture and publishing, involving pre-scheduling, automatic capture and the creation of a 'recordings viewer' in the VLE. This ensured that teaching staff have minimal involvement, other than completing a consent form in advance of their session. Relevant sessions were pre-scheduled for recording by the Educational Technology team, using the echo360 scheduler tool. This automatically triggered the recording to begin in the appropriate lecture theatre at the beginning of the session (on the hour) and would run for the full duration of the session. The system would record anything presented through the podium (typically PowerPoint, but occasionally Internet pages or the visualiser), together with the audio commentary, provided the podium or lapel microphone was switched on. Once a recording is complete, it is uploaded to the echo360 server, processed for viewing and published to the web in the form of a hyperlink and RSS feed. The Educational Technology team created an application to allow this to be viewable within a module folder on the university learning environment (WebCT) within minutes of the lecture ending.

## Rolling out lecture capture II: recommended changes in faculty practice

Lecture recording does not require substantive changes to lecturing style. Typically the largest adjustment required for teaching staff is to remember that a recording is being made and that its subsequent distribution cannot be controlled. This can be surprisingly difficult due to the unobtrusive nature of the technology and emphasises the importance of maintaining professional standards. Often a key issue is to ensure that slide figures are obtained from appropriate sources and/or are properly attributed. Similarly, normal good practice is usually sufficient to ensure the effectiveness of the recording. For example, a brief introduction, reviewing content and so on is an appropriate opening for a lecture, irrespective of whether it is live or recorded. However, experience suggests the following recommendations increase the recording's effectiveness:

- Generally, teaching staff do not need to change their practice for recorded sessions, but this is a case for individual judgment. For example, a lecturing style incorporating jokes or discursive asides may engage students attending the lecture but will often seem irrelevant in recordings.
- The onset of recording is set automatically but this will rarely coincide with the start of the lecture due to inevitable delays in students arriving, settling down, and so on. Teaching staff can avoid recording this “white noise” by turning the microphone on only when they are ready to start and by starting their PowerPoint presentation with a clear “title” slide. Although it is possible to edit recordings, these delays become familiar to students accessing the recordings and are easily skipped. More importantly, the editing software allows review of the lecture, the deletion of any gross errors and (if need be) insertion of replacement material.
- Students rarely listen to lecture recordings in a linear manner, often fast-forwarding to a specific slide or concept. Numbering the slides, and occasionally stating the slide number (“So, here on slide 16 we can see . . .”), helps students navigate the recording. The editing software allows the lecturer to “tag” slides in the recorded lecture with html links to facilitate these jumps. In addition, html links to other resources, such as animations and PDF files, can be inserted. However, these typically recapitulate written resources and, unless alternatives are unavailable, are largely redundant.
- The technology cannot capture laser pointer use, so it is useful to give location-based statements when discussing slides (“In the top right we can see . . .”).
- Current recording software does not incorporate video clips and/or personal response systems (“clicker”) sessions effectively, so these should be presented as distinct non-recorded files. However, audio-recording this activity can convey the engagement of the live audience and help entice non-attending students.

## Rolling out lecture capture III: guiding student use

For most students lecture capture is a novel technology and they need guidance on how best to exploit recordings in their study routine. For a minority, reviewing lectures could displace more productive forms of independent study (such as reading textbooks), whereas others, for example students with lecture centric/pragmatist attitudes (Bennett and Manair, 2008; Dolnicar, 2005), may adopt a “surface learning” approach to the material. Any module which uses recordings should give guidance on their optimal use at the onset, stressing their purpose as a resource to supplement notes, or help recap unclear areas or concepts. It is important to emphasise that students are not expected to access all the recordings and that textbooks remain a key resource for independent study. Finally, we counter surface learning attitudes by emphasising that the exams focus on integration and/or understanding rather than straightforward recall of lecture content.

International studies have not detected an impact of lecture recording on attendance (Phillips et al., 2007), however a small decrease (~5%) in some cohorts was observed. This is a concern for teaching staff and there are a number of strategies to minimise this:

- Ensure recordings from the previous academic year(s) are unavailable.
- Emphasise that the technology is “experimental” and it is unclear whether recordings of every lecture will be available.
- Incorporate activities which cannot be accessed via the recordings. Given student focus on assessment, we use a combination of quizzes, “clicker” sessions and peer instruction (Crouch and Mazur, 2001) to enrich lectures. This approach increases student engagement, shows the level of integration expected and challenges students’ assumptions that they understand the material adequately.

## How the intervention engages students

We find that supplemental lecture recording is welcomed by the overwhelming majority of students and is widely used, but the extent to which individual students access the material varies widely. Importantly, we found most students used the material in a strategic or “targeted” manner, to access missed lectures or revisit difficult concepts when assessing lecture notes. A key finding is the specific benefits for dyslexic and some non-English-speaking background (NESB) students, many of whom devote significant amounts of time to the recordings, apparently to compensate for a lack of confidence in their lecture note-taking skills. For these students, recordings are a routine part of their study as they download most recordings as soon as they are available. These students are highly enthusiastic about the technology and emphatic that the approach should be used

comprehensively throughout the programme. Finally, despite the widespread uptake and (apparently) appropriate use of these materials, we do not detect a statistically significant impact on academic performance in the end-of-year exams.

There are some negative aspects of lecture recording. We detected a small but consistent reduction in lecture attendance, but this appears to vary from year to year. Furthermore, recording may legitimise the surface learning attitudes of some students, who think that learning the material in lectures is sufficient for exam success. However this attitude did not seem to be widespread and there is no evidence that the availability of lecture recordings reinforced this.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

The broad findings of the What works? programme suggest that interventions designed to engage and retain students are ideally “mainstream” activities that are broadly academically relevant. We did not establish supplementary lecture capture with this in mind but the approach is consistent with these recommendations – combining support for student diversity (for example, for dyslexic or NESB students) and an inclusive approach that is accessed by the bulk of the cohort. Given students’ enthusiasm for the approach we speculate that the technology does have a role to play in retention.

In addition, What Works? stresses that knowledgeable and enthusiastic lecturers (and implicitly, lectures) have a central role in inspiring students’ interest. We suggest that supplementary lecture capture, combined with other approaches to enrich this format (“clicker” sessions, peer instruction, and so on) can broaden this appeal to a wider range of students.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

Our two-year trial of lecture capture aimed to assess whether supplemental lecture recordings were useful learning materials and the impact they had on student behaviour and academic performance. Students’ attitudes toward, and the extent of their use of these materials, was assessed by several approaches, including questionnaires, focus groups and quantifying the number of downloads for recorded lectures. This multi-year, triangulating approach allowed many of the findings to be validated in two cohorts, and by several independent lines of evidence. For example, both the download data for all recorded lectures (2010–11: 49 lectures, 1,896 downloads) and student responses to our questionnaire suggested that ~50% of the cohort typically access recordings, increasing to 75% for some lectures. Similarly, our evidence that students use the material in a targeted manner is based on evidence from questionnaires (i. e., the majority typically download one or two recordings, listen to small sections and use them for note-taking and/or revision). This was consistent with the download data showing that lectures are accessed to different extents, and the bi-modal pattern of activity, with a peak immediately after the lecture, consistent with reviewing lecture notes, and another during Easter, reflecting revision for the final exams.

Our evidence that dyslexic and some NESB students rely heavily on the recordings reflects our focus on these students and requests for disclosure in the questionnaire. This showed these students were disproportionately high users of the materials, as they tended to download all of the material available and dedicated a large proportion of their independent study to the recordings. Focus groups with these students found many reported problems in taking lecture notes and valued how recordings allowed them to make notes at their own pace.

We also used the focus groups to explore some negative aspects of lecture capture technology. Most participants did not think comprehensive lecture capture would impact on lecture attendance. However, predictions that this would reduce attendance at lectures early in the day, and anecdotes of students missing lectures but planning to “catch up” using recordings, suggested that this was an issue. This was consistent with our observation that attendance decreased in some recorded lectures, though this seems to be dependent on the cohort (for example: no impact in 2009–10; ~5% decrease in several modules in 2011–12. ) Similarly, students’ use of recordings was not always optimal. Focus group members were aware that these are ideally used in a targeted manner, however several admitted to poor judgment, for example in listening to the whole lecture when this was not their original intention, or accessing recordings because they were more convenient than textbooks.

Finally, our study assessed the impact of lecture capture on academic performance by comparing final exam results in recorded and non-recorded modules. This showed no significant difference for either the distribution of marks of the whole cohort, or for students who allowed us to correlate their grades and lecture recording use (i. e., recording “users” vs. “non-users”) by disclosing their ID number on the questionnaire. This is perhaps not surprising, given the wide variation in grades across the cohort and the limited number of students consenting to the analysis (~50% of the cohort). This suggests that any impact on academic performance is likely to be relatively small.

## Conclusion

The outcomes of our study on supplementary lecture capture are overwhelmingly positive, given that the recordings are:

- engaging supplementary learning materials;
- used by the bulk of the cohort;
- seem to be a particularly effective means of supporting dyslexic and some NESB students.

Finally, the negative outcomes of the approach (for example, reduced attendance, encouraging “surface learning” attitudes) are sporadic and/or involve a small minority of students. This is consistent with international experience and should not discourage course managers from considering introducing the approach.

## Recommendations for institutional policy

The technology and approach is recommended, albeit subject to caveats focusing on its context and use:

### (1) Course context

Our study evaluated lecture capture in two modules in the context of a high contact (average 20 hours per week) Medical Science course. As such, recordings did not have a substantive impact on the curriculum: the vast majority of lectures remained unrecorded and students typically had several activities (such as laboratory practicals or small group teaching) on most days. This may explain the minimal change in student attendance. We anticipate this may decrease more substantially in the context of courses that have lower contact hours or if lectures are comprehensively recorded.

### (2) Scope, timeframe and stakeholders

Our experience suggests that lecture recording should be introduced gradually to allow the multiple stakeholders involved to establish best practice. Comprehensive lecture capture for whole courses is probably best considered as a long-term goal. The key issues are:

- Establish the scope of lecture capture. Decisions on the scope of lecture capture will be determined by course/discipline-specific contexts and the capacity to support this activity. Our initial focus on large cohort lectures in years 1 and 2 reflected the students’ perceived need for support in these years and the low level of student interaction in these sessions. We feel lecture capture is less necessary in the small cohort, interactive seminars typical of year 3.
- Increase resource to educational technology. Many educational technology teams will have sufficient expertise to establish the lecture capture process but may need extra staff to maintain the associated workload. We found an additional administrator was needed to ensure staff consent was in place and to schedule/publish recordings.
- Engage teaching staff. Our experience is that teaching staff need to be persuaded of the benefits of lecture capture, as a substantial proportion have pedagogy-based concerns (for example, impact on student attendance/attitudes to learning). Small-scale trial(s) and dissemination of outcomes by enthusiastic “early adopters” is likely to overcome most objections.
- Clarify organisational policy on copyright. A key issue is to ensure organisational policy on copyright (for example, consent to use textbook or Internet-sourced images in recorded material) is in place, particularly as recordings may be distributed by students so their dissemination cannot be controlled. The use of textbook figures in recorded lectures remains a grey area for many publishers, but this needs to be resolved, particularly for disciplines where lectures contain multiple diagrams/figures, so obtaining consent involves substantial effort. This issue has the potential to block staff engagement as the responsibility for using images remains with individual lecturers.

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# Using formative assessment to stimulate reflection and ownership amongst academically weak first-year undergraduate medical students

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## Keywords

- formative assessment
- learning process
- reflection
- ownership

## Nature of intervention

Improvement of student retention and success through early and systematic formative assessment in the School of Medicine.

## Focus of intervention

The intervention is academic in nature and aimed at:

- identifying academically weak students very early in the semester;
- supporting the development of their learning process by stimulating reflection and establishing ownership;
- monitoring performance throughout the first semester.

The objective was to improve both academic practice and the student experience.

## Description of intervention

Students are able to use formative assessment to foster learning (Kibble, 2007). A key feature of this type of assessment is the feedback generated for students to guide them in improving their performance (William and Black, 1996). But in order for the formative feedback to be effective it needs to be delivered early in the learning process (Brown and Knight, 1994). This gives underperforming students sufficient time to implement changes to develop and restructure their understanding.

An effective feedback process should empower the student to become an independent learner. Student support is a fundamental component of the formative assessment process as well as integral to any flourishing student retention and success programme. The difficulty arises in identifying those students who require support. This has been acknowledged by Warren (2002), who highlights that a support programme does not necessarily reach the intended students, particularly the unmotivated and academically weak. This is especially problematic during a time when students face the enormous transition of moving from a rote-learning environment in school to a university curriculum, which is both integrated and constructively aligned. There is a clear need for academic and pastoral support to be integrated into the assessment process in the medical programme as it admits both national and international students with different educational backgrounds and learning needs. So with this mind, attention was turned to integrating and developing feedback strategies for weaker students, which go beyond just conveying repetitive messages pertaining to strengths and weaknesses of their work with no affirmative action on either side.

The consequences of using a routine feedback approach has resulted in polarised performances: at one end, a group of capable students is doing well in both formative and summative assessments regardless of intervention and at the other end, a group of underperforming individuals failing both assessments. An investigation into the formative feedback process was conducted in order to harmonise the links between detection, support and monitoring for those who were academically weak. Steps were taken to develop an effective and systematic approach using formative assessment as a cornerstone to identify and sort struggling students, for which a conceptual framework is outlined in Figure 1.

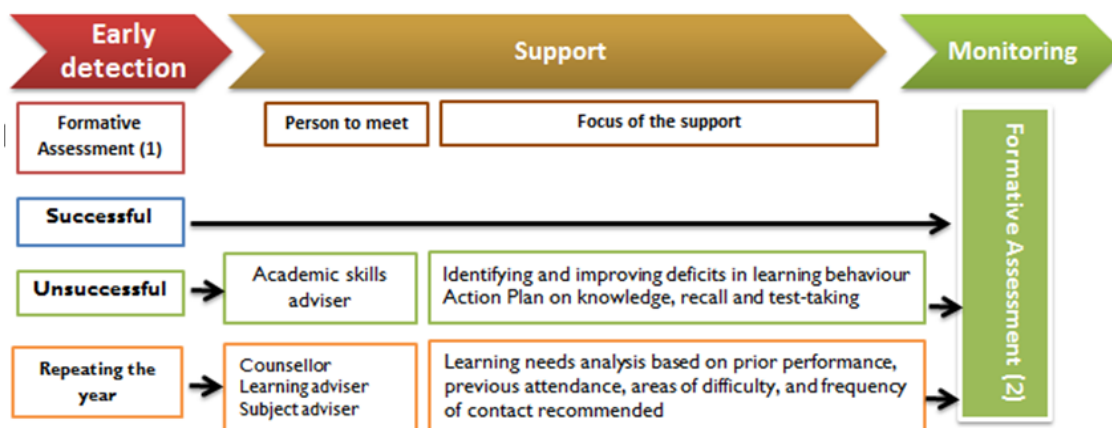
The process involves three key steps: early detection using formative assessment, identifying the type of support based on formative assessment scores and past performance, and establishing a plan for corrective action targeting the student's weaknesses, developed through discussion and reflection with the student. Early detection of weak students was crucial for success. In the past our formative assessment was a one-off, mid-semester test which resulted in two problems. First, there



were difficulties for staff in meeting with all the struggling students before the end of semester. Second, there were difficulties for students in implementing the changes in learning behaviour necessary for success before the summative exams. The intervention involved moving the formative assessment from the beginning of week 9 to the end of week 3 in a 12-week semester, and administering it three times during the first semester (weeks 3, 7 and 11) instead of just once. These changes allowed a small team, composed of academic and support staff, to detect struggling students early and to monitor their progress over the first semester. Additionally, it helped students to develop skills such as reflection and meta-cognition to enhance their performance. The type of support given to students had to be developed around a core determinant, namely the score obtained from the first formative assessment. Students were subsequently triaged into one of three categories:

- 1 successful in first formative assessment (FFA);
- 2 unsuccessful in FFA; and
- 3 repeating the year, regardless of whether they were successful or unsuccessful in FFA.

Successful students were monitored using their subsequent formative assessment scores over the first semester but no intervention was implemented. Those in the second category met with the academic skills adviser who focused the discussion on helping students identify and improve deficits in learning behaviour with action plans targeting three core fundamentals to become a successful medical student (knowledge, recall, test-taking). Those in the third category met with a team composed of a counsellor, learning adviser and a subject adviser. These students had a learning needs analysis conducted using a questionnaire with four key themes: reasons for prior academic performance; previous attendance data; areas of difficulty addressed with the student; and frequency of contact recommended. The first meeting with underperforming students was held within a few days of the FFA scores being released.



**Figure 1: Conceptual framework using formative assessment to stimulate reflection and ownership amongst academically weak first-year undergraduate medical students**

### How the intervention engages students

The key features of the intervention were a dialogue which developed between staff and student during the face-to-face meeting and the awareness in students to discuss deficits and how they could be improved. This self-realisation in the student allowed them to detect gaps in their own skills and understanding. This later allowed them to build ownership of their learning. Shown below are four extracts taken from reflections sent to the study skills adviser after their first appointment:

Student 1: “The methods we discussed really helped me organise my work. Overall, I am really grateful to you, and I wish we had met before.”

Student 2: “After we spoke, I tried the method we discussed I went over lectures from that day. I found it to be very helpful as the information was still fresh in my mind.”

Student 3: “I actually sat down and condensed today’s lecture into half a page almost immediately after our talk.”

Student 4: “I found that all the study behaviour skills extremely useful and my goal is to incorporate this method into my studies more.”

### Link to the What Works? findings

Overall our intervention attempted to connect two themes: first, to develop relationships between staff and students, promoting engagement and success; and second, to improve student study skills and develop self-confidence.

Implementing the detection, support and monitoring process required advisers from both the academic and pastoral teams to work with the students closely. A tutor-based support system to monitor and oversee the progress of students is not

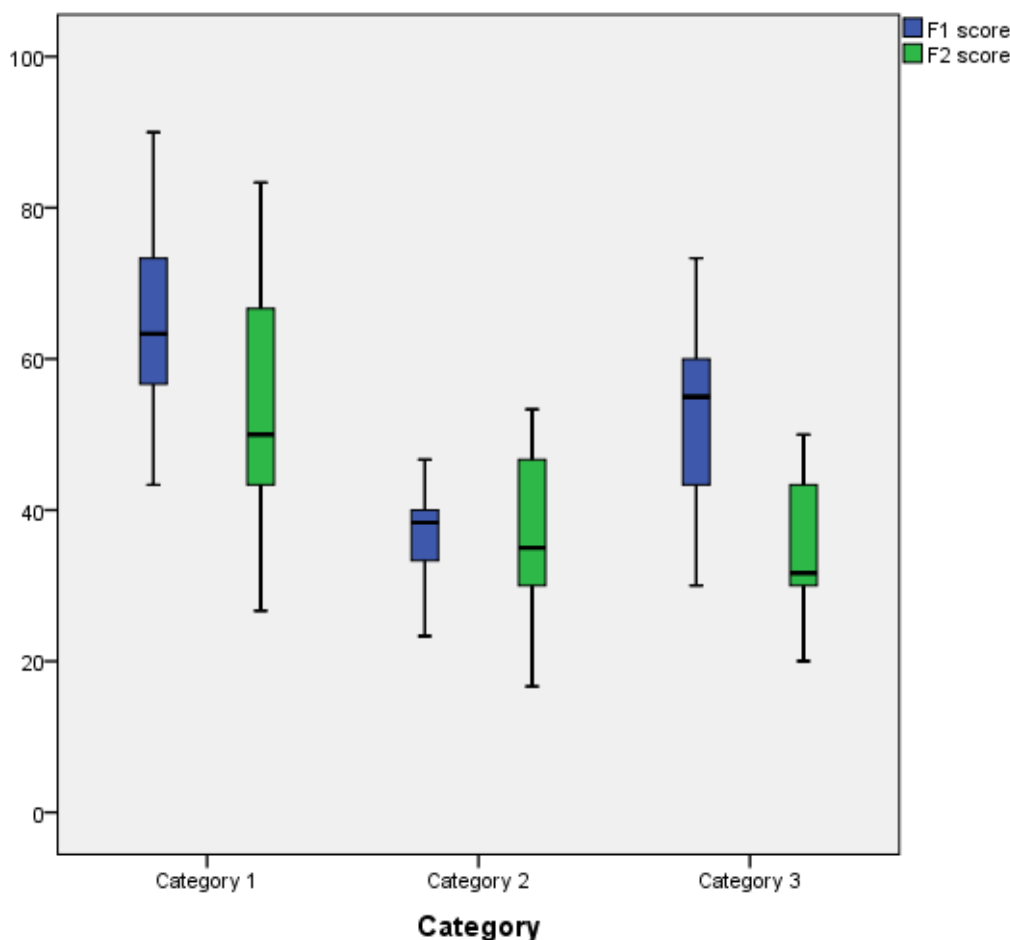
favoured because our past experience showed this method provided only a superficial level of student support. The challenge for this new support was the establishment of a longer-term dialogue between the underperforming students and appropriately skilled staff to help them identify and improve gaps in their learning process over a period of time.

We could see that fostering student learning through this interaction brought elements of meta-cognition and adaptability to the forefront of their minds. This was a crucial step in the process of developing ownership of their learning.

### Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Our formative assessment model uses scores and frequency as its two main determinants. Having more than one formative assessment allowed us to measure the impact of the intervention on the performance of students over the semester before summative assessments. We discovered that there was a particularly significant correlation between student performance in formative assessment one and two and the category they had initially been placed in, based on their FFA score as illustrated in Figure 2. There are three main observations. First, the successful students (category one) show a decrease in scores between the two formative assessments by a mean value of 10.5% (95% CI, 8.4 to 12.6, p value <0.001), which was statistically significant. Second, again statistically significant, the repeating students (category three) also dropped their scores with a much larger mean value of 17.0% (95% CI, 7.2 to 26.8, p value = 0.004) between the two assessments. Third, the weak students (category two) were found to have a very small and statistically insignificant drop of 1.7% (95% CI, -4.1 to 7.5, p value 0.55) between the FFA score and the second.

The impact of the intervention with students in category two is clear and shows that it has a stabilising affect on their performance. It shows the benefit of cultivating the use of reflection in students to determine their own gaps in learning. This subsequently leads them to seek viable solutions to fill those gaps, empowering them with ownership of their learning. In the other two groups, students seem to have determined a method of learning based on that they had used previously at school which was sufficient by providing them with a good score in the FFA. But the lower scores obtained by these categories of student in the second formative assessment suggests their methods were unsustainable and led to a significant drop in performance for the majority of the students. An alternative consideration for these two categories could be that the second assessment, covering twice the content of the first, was more difficult to prepare for and led to a poorer second performance.



**Figure 2: A box plot showing scores as a percentage on the y axis and category of student along the x axis as determined by their performance in the first formative assessment. Blue colour indicates performance in the first formative assessment and green in the second formative assessment**

## Conclusion

Formative feedback forms an integral part of the student learning process and the delivery of that feedback is important. Students who presented themselves as academically weak were seen to stabilise their scores when given the opportunity to reflect on their deficits which helped them take ownership of their learning. Recommendations for practice involve the use of one-to-one sessions with students in order to foster and nurture sustainable and successful learning behaviour. Although time-consuming, we consider the benefit in turning students into independent and thoughtful learners justifies the time spent.

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## Reflection by doing: Making reflection work for the student

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### Keywords

- reflection
- learning experience
- student experience
- ownership.

### Nature of the intervention

Reflection by doing is a way to give reflection on learning experience back to the student: firstly in foundation degrees in Early Years Childhood Education and in Paramedic Science. Subsequently used in a BA Honours degree in Art, Design and Media, all at the University of Portsmouth.

### Focus of the intervention

As students make sense of their own learning experience, they also explore, articulate and resolve some of the tensions between their professional and academic learning and work. This enhances their student experience and has a positive impact on their academic and professional practice. It also enables them to share rich, tacit knowledge of their experience, if and when they so wish, with current and future students.

### Description of the intervention

A safe space for exploring, articulating and reflecting on rich, tacit knowledge of learning experience, in conversation with a minimalist-intervention facilitator. Students *do* reflection, rather than *learn about* it.

This is achieved as follows.

#### Introduction

The method, nested narratives (Williams *et al.*, 2007), was developed with students in the Affordances for Learning research project, funded by the HEA (2007–08). Students were very happy to tell stories about their learning experience but only if they did not have to do any reflection. Reflection, in their experience, was formulaic and irrelevant.

However, at the end of the nested narratives project, they said it was really worthwhile, because “it was such a good way to reflect on your learning experience”, which is ironic, to say the least.

#### The method

The method is, simply, reflection by doing, not by instruction. The facilitator invites the narrator to tell a series of narratives about something they have learnt in their academic or professional practice. This enables them to explore and reflect on their learning experience, particularly on their own tacit knowledge of it.

#### Narrator’s own agenda

The choice of the initial narrative is determined entirely by the narrator. The narratives that follow are prompted by asking the narrator to elaborate on exact phrases from their initial narrative. They are only asked to describe what happened, in more detail. No explanations, analysis or evaluations are requested. They can add to their narratives later on if they wish.

#### Narrator’s ownership

The initial narrative, the subsequent nested narratives, and all later elaborations on these narratives are confidential, and are shared only as and when the narrator agrees to do so. The narrator is in more than one sense the ‘primary researcher’.

### Neutral facilitator

The facilitator must be outside of any hierarchical or reporting-line relationship with the narrator.

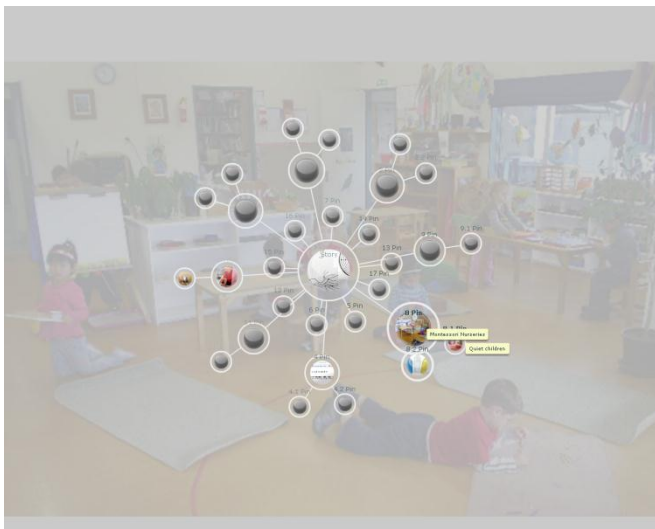
### Neutral space

The narratives are not framed inside (or outside) any specific academic, professional, analytic, evaluative, or social frameworks. The story space is created on the narrator's own terms.

### How the intervention engages students

This facilitated but minimalist-intervention narrative method, derived to quite a large extent from the Biographical Narratives Interview Method, BNIM (Wengraf, 2002), creates a set of clustered narratives, which the narrator can re-organise and add to, to make sense of their own learning, practice, and personal and professional development. Ownership, neutral facilitation and neutral space are absolute requirements for trust, which establishes a unique set of conditions for exploring, articulating and (with permission) sharing rich tacit knowledge.

Figure 1 and Figure 2 are pictures from the interactive story interface that have been developed. In Figure 1, the story elements are foregrounded and in Figure 2 the story elements fade to the background and the picture (of a Montessori pre-school) comes to the fore.



**Figure 1: Story elements in interactive interface**



**Figure 2: Selected picture from interface**

### Link to **What Works?** findings

The nested narratives method enables students to explore and articulate their experience of learning, both to do things, as well as to be, and to become someone – fulfilling roles and expectations in professions and as practitioners. This is uniquely focused on their rich, tacit knowledge of their learning. It thereby provides a unique basis for developing confidence, exploring future aspirations, exploring and establishing relationships with peers, and developing a sense of belonging within the university community and within prospective professional and practitioner communities.

This can only take place within a safe space, where their ownership, agenda, and a neutral space with a neutral facilitator are guaranteed. They must, therefore, be in charge of which aspects of their tacit understandings of their own learning are shared or are not. Surprisingly, though, most students are more than willing to share most if not all of their narratives, even if this is only after they have ‘worked through the stories’ for some months.

This provides a unique set of resources for peers and for subsequent cohorts of students to explore the rich, tacit understandings of their learning, not only about how to learn to do things, but also what is involved in becoming and being a practitioner and a professional – in academia as well as in other professions.

Finally, nested narratives provide them with the experience of, and skills for, reflecting by doing. Reflecting becomes a rich experience in itself.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

In the Affordances for Learning research project, this method was used with mature students returning to studying in foundation degrees, in Early Childhood Education and in Paramedic Science. It has subsequently been used, successfully, with students entering higher education directly from school in Honours degree programmes in Art, Design and Media.

One of the key issues for many of the foundation degree students was the tension between their professional work, in which they were quite confident, and their academic work, in which confidence was often lacking. For quite a few, there was also a tension between the different and competing demands of their professional and academic work. By exploring their learning experience in a safe space under their own control, students could articulate their tacit (and explicit) experience of learning, reflect on it and make sense of it, and decide which aspects to put into the public domain and which to keep (for a while at least) as personal and confidential.

All the students who participated in nested narratives said that they “discovered things they did not know they knew”. In knowledge management terms, it surfaced rich, tacit knowledge in a supportive environment.

The following student excerpts come from students who participated in nested narratives (the names have been changed).

#### **Mike**

Mike was a paramedic, returning to university (he had a previous degree in sport science) to upgrade his professional qualification by taking a foundation degree.

His story, which he ironically called “Distance education”, was ostensibly about the considerable resentment he felt at the amount of time wasted in travelling many hours to and from the university, only to be told on more than one occasion, when he arrived, that the day’s programme was “self-study”, which he could just as well have done at home.

He also said that he had no interest in biochemistry *per se* – for example, a lecture on the biochemistry of Aspirin, because the lecturer made no attempt to link the (potentially interesting) characteristics of Aspirin to other analgesics, knowledge which could be of use in his professional practice, in emergency intervention. This highlighted the crucial tension between professional and academic learning and practice: he did not want to become an academic researcher, but was very interested in research-informed professional practice. His interests and the interests of the lecturer were, actually, poles apart.

#### **April**

April was a pre-school manager, returning to university to upgrade her professional qualifications. She was quite confident as a manager, but not confident as a mature student returning to learning.

A crucial part of her story was an account of her “school visit” to other primary schools, and primary school resource centres. What she found in one of the schools she visited astonished her – quiet, engaged children, just going about their learning, with glass bottles of flowers on each table. The children in her school were boisterous, noisy, and it was unthinkable, and far too dangerous, to put real glass bottles on their tables. She found out that the particular approach in this school, a Montessori school, was based on quite different principles – internal motivation and ongoing and systematic observation of the needs of each child. She started to rethink her entire approach to pre-school management and teaching.

What was more astonishing to her, and to the research team, was that the extensive and high level learning that she subsequently engaged in – in applying the principles she has learnt about in her visit to carry out systematic change management in her school and, later on, in neighbouring schools as well – could not be accommodated in her learning, assessment and qualification. It was “at far too high a level” for a first year academic programme and could not “be counted” towards her foundation degree.

## Conclusion

The examples described (see also Williams et al., 2009) show the powerful role that methods like nested narratives can play in enabling students to grapple with, explore, articulate, and in principle to share and hopefully even resolve, tensions in their experience of learning how to become professional practitioners. Nested narratives can also play a unique role in providing knowledge of rich, tacit understandings of student learning, for university administrators and academics, to come to terms with the often substantial disjuncture between learning to be an academic and learning to be a professional. 'Graduate professional' courses are often experienced as an uncomfortable oxymoron by these students.

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## Using student self-assessment to provide immediate assignment feedback

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### Keywords

- self-assessment
- feedback
- student/staff dialogue
- culture of belonging
- non-traditional higher education students

### Nature of intervention

A cross-college intervention which sought to develop strategies so that students use self-assessment as a means of deepening their understanding of the learning outcomes required in order for them to be successful at whatever level they were targeting.

### Focus of intervention

This intervention was primarily academic in that it sought to heighten student understanding but it also had professional implications for teaching staff in that it presented them with clear data from students that evidenced areas of certainty, clarity or ambiguity in the learning experience. It also challenged tutors to reflect on how power was distributed between learner and teacher when it came to assessment.

### Description of intervention

Following a higher education (HE) in further education (FE) cross-college staff development event with Professor Phil Race in September 2010, teaching staff across a range of disciplines (Art, Design and Media, Childhood and Youth Studies and Social Work) decided to develop strategies intended to give students “fresh and fast” feedback (Race, 2007).

While external examiners and students had consistently commended the quality of written feedback (and its relative speed in delivery – typically within three working weeks), it was still recognised that the best feedback was given as soon as possible after work was submitted. To that end it was agreed that the person best fitted to provide that feedback was the student themselves (Boud, 1995).

Teaching teams developed an instant feedback sheet – adapted for each piece of assessed work – in which they highlighted and identified the most likely or common areas where feedback to students might be anticipated. Short statements were written addressing, for example, aspects of structure, content and academic style, and students were asked to provide their own written summary against these statements at the same time as the work was submitted for assessment. In this way, students were able to voice their opinion, and sense where their work was weak or strong, while also able to direct tutors to those aspects of the work they were most concerned to get feedback on.

It is to be acknowledged that students – especially those new to HE – may not necessarily appreciate how best to frame this self-assessment. They have yet to be comfortable with the language of grading criteria or constructive and critical feedback. Student groups have tutorials that introduce the notion of self-assessment and at that stage guidance can be given that helps identify points of focus. In tutorials students write “mock self-assessments” using an early, formative piece of work. Peer review and assessment allows students to reflect on how this task may be done – recognising that there is no single “right” way of working.

- The “points of focus” will be shaped by the nature of the assessment task, the module studied and the level on the programme. Typically students will be encouraged to reflect on:
- The structure of the submitted work. Is there a purposeful introduction? Is a clear argument developed and sustained? Does the conclusion accurately reflect the evidence presented and discussed?
- In what ways has the submitted work engaged with the learning outcomes? If description, evaluation or analysis is required, is the student confident that has been achieved?



- Have academic conventions been consistently addressed? For example, have the referencing requirements been met? Is the work written in a suitable style in terms of language and grammar?
- In providing written summative feedback, tutors in part “replied” to the student self-assessment summary, focusing directly on the issues identified as important by the student themselves. This whole sheet was later available for further discussion and reflection in individual tutorials.

### **How the intervention engages students**

Simply, the self-assessment approach makes feedback more of a dialogue – something that students are a part of rather than something that happens to them. More precisely the intervention introduced the possibility for students to feel that they are more able to make judgements about where their learning stands in relation to the learning criteria and objectives. Further students were able to make use of the feedback to the self-assessment and reflect on how relevant it was to them and to what extent it responded to their needs. Finally there was the possibility that students would feel less anxious about assignment submission as a result of self-assessment.

Literature indicates that that student self-assessment is vital in developing meta-cognition skills as students monitor and review their own performance (Lew *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, the fundamental intention of self-assessment is to empower students by developing their self-regulation skills (Hattie, 2012). Interestingly, literature demonstrates (Tan, 2008) that students are not always empowered but instead may become a victim of the over-use of power in assessment situations. The extent to which this intervention addresses this last issue is of interest.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

Students enrolling on HE programmes at a predominantly FE college such as Stockport come almost entirely from ‘non-traditional’ HE backgrounds. Typically Stockport undergraduates are first-generation HE students within their own families. Most Stockport undergraduates have fewer than 160 UCAS points on entry and all come from the state secondary education sector. Stockport as a borough is a very mixed area socially and economically with the gap between the wealthiest and most disadvantaged being particularly wide.

This intervention directly addresses some of the key objectives of the What Works? project. By establishing direct and meaningful interactions between learner and teacher, the self-assessment strategy offers an opportunity to establish a sense of belonging for the student, integrating them in a purposeful way into the HE culture. In the extent to which students became more confident in themselves as learners, and successful learners at that, self-assessment might be seen as part of a planned strategy for supporting non-traditional HE students.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

It is very early days so far as this intervention is concerned and there is just one full year’s worth of experience to reflect on. Stockport College started from a strong position in terms of student satisfaction – NSS results for 2011 and 2012 both put the college in the top quartile. As you would expect the evidence is inconsistent and inconclusive. On the one hand, a cohort of 20 level 6 students graduated in June 2012 with the best results ever obtained by a similar group at Stockport College, with 75% of students gaining either a 1st or 2:1 final classification. On the other hand, Shaffi (2012) reported that although some students made good use of the self-assessment by using the feedback to inform their next assignment and making judgements about the value of their work, in relation to grading criteria, the majority suggested that it was not worthwhile and did not demonstrate any improvement in self-regulation skills.

Further, Shaffi (2012) argues that because tutors introduced the strategy without proper discussion with students, it did little to challenge the power relationships inherent in the assessment process. Tutors who were keen and anxious to engage directly with students in the assessment process may have acted too quickly, too soon, and had therefore failed to prepare the ground sufficiently to take students with them. Discussions with staff and students have identified a number of themes for reflection.

For example, some students reported that they felt that they needed more time to complete the self-assessment form. While no time limit was imposed, some students submitted their assessment within five minutes and that put pressure on others to complete their work. Some students felt that this additional task added to their sense of anxiety and encouraged a focus on weaknesses rather than strengths. One reported: “I was more anxious as I used negative comments about myself and I felt this drew attention to my faults, furthermore I was anxious because I didn’t know how the system would work.” Finally some tutors were unsure about the appropriateness of the task: “The year 3 students have more idea about what is realistic as they now have some sense of comparing one piece of work with another, although at times the students seemed only to be interested in what the work is worth. In other cases (year 1 and 2) is it fair to ask the students something which they know nothing about?”

At this stage there is no real evidence that self-assessment has been harmful but it could be that for some students, the intervention is seen as additional and unnecessary work and not something to engage with. Shaffi (2012) notes that it is important to be committed to developing more innovative approaches to assessment in response to the call for a more

inclusive method of assessment that reflects the needs of the new era of students currently attending higher education institutes. The concerns raised by the Burgess Report (2007) in relation to the communication of assessment standards through the development of collaborative assessment remain important.

## Conclusion

Looking back over the past two years it seems fair to judge that an initial enthusiasm to make a difference may have resulted in introducing new approaches too quickly. This approach is now in its third year (having been introduced early in 2010–11) and it has been found necessary to make amendments every year. The staff are perhaps guilty of a little naivety in thinking they could “get it right” first time. Further there may have been an over-estimation of the capacity of students to adapt positively to a new approach. For first-year (level 4) students there was a lack of experience to inform the task of self-assessment; for students at levels 5 and 6 there may have been a resistance to change where they saw no immediate benefit to themselves.

The teaching team has learned to spend more time in the induction process so that students are engaged from the outset with the task and purpose of self-assessment. By reviewing the research in the group tutorial, evidence shows that students have come to recognise the value and benefits of the self-assessment process. It is not claimed that this process has been a universal success but there is sufficient encouragement to want to continue to develop this approach.

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## Section 3: Supporting students

In this section, nine interventions are presented that aim to support students academically, socially and professionally. The first paper, from James Derounian at the University of Gloucestershire, describes an innovative tool for engaging distant students. Following this, the approach adopted by Lorraine Allibone *et al.* of the Academic Skills Centre at Kingston University is discussed in some detail before the work undertaken at Keele University with final-year medical students is described by Shelton *et al.* The next intervention comes from Teeside University where student support officers (SSOs) provide a bridge between students and academics. Diane Nutt shows how the SSOs play a vital role in encouraging student engagement and creating a sense of belonging.

A different approach comes from Bournemouth University, which offers a tracking tutor system for nursing students who have interrupted their studies or are considering leaving the course. Sara White highlights the success of the intervention, showing how it improves retention and success. Following this, Judy Miller at the University of Worcester addresses the issues of attrition amongst mature trainee secondary school teachers.

Beltman *et al.* of Curtin University in Perth, Western Australia, take a broader perspective and discuss a mentoring programme in which senior students are assigned to every undergraduate. The theme of mentoring is continued by Justin Kennedy and Sophie Stewart at the University of Manchester, who show how the Students as Partners (SaP) programme encourages meaningful relationships for new students and in doing so promotes a sense of belonging. The final paper in this section discusses another pilot peer mentoring scheme, which is administered online. Jill Andeanoff at the University of Hertfordshire describes an e-mentoring system which is used to monitor the frequency and quality of the mentoring relationships in the group.

## Enhancing student support, learning and interaction through synchronous online contact sessions

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### Keywords

- synchronous
- VLE
- Moodle
- interaction
- distance and blended learning

### Nature of intervention

Synchronous virtual lectures related to community engagement and governance. The intervention has academic, social and professional aspects.

### Focus of intervention

This intervention is aimed at enhancing the student experience and improving practice; it spans academic, social and professional support and interaction.

### Description of intervention

This intervention relates to blended learning, the “introduction of online media into a course or programme, while at the same time recognising that there is merit in retaining face-to-face contact and other traditional approaches to supporting students” (Macdonald, 2006: 2). Garrison and Kanuka (2004) boldly assert that given “the increasing evidence that Internet information and communication technologies are transforming much of society, there is little reason to believe that it will not be the defining transformative innovation for higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”.

The intervention under consideration is a simple and effective way of reaching and involving distant students through the medium of a virtual learning environment (VLE) with a focus on synchronous, timetabled, online lectures and seminars. Such a mechanism links to Macdonald’s (2006) quote, in that staff and tutors “meet” as if for a “traditional” lecture. This approach was first undertaken using WebCT and now Moodle. Students and staff agree to “turn up” on Moodle at an agreed time and day. This is heavily flagged to participants online and via email some weeks ahead, to ensure that as many people show and don’t forget the opportunity.

These synchronous encounters normally start with everyone introducing themselves, so attendees know who is present and where they are from (both in terms of geographical location and the type of work they are engaged in, for example a local authority staff member from Yorkshire). All of my Community Engagement and Governance CertHE, FdA and Honours students study part-time, are mature, and have a day job. They join in sessions from work or home from locations across Wales and England. Most have child or elder care responsibilities. Having made introductions, the tutor invites comments on assignment progress and responds to these with advice, contacts, references, and so on. The class will then discuss a (topical) issue around community engagement, in line with particular module requirements. At the time of writing, participants might discuss, for example, author JK Rowling’s view of localism as set down in her 2012 novel “The Casual Vacancy”, Big Society and local councils, sustainable communities or 21<sup>st</sup>-century rural life.

This mechanism enables students (and staff) to access a permanent record of the session plus exchanges whenever convenient to them (day or night!). Some students feel more comfortable writing contributions, as opposed to having to speak in a conventional face-to-face contact session on campus. A number of quieter individuals have commented in feedback that they feel more confident at a distance, online, where they are able to think before they commit ideas to wider/peer scrutiny. Participants can also post support materials such as Word documents as attachments, live hyperlinks, and so on. This method of communication requires access to dependable broadband and preferably somewhere quiet to enable concentration. Students stated that they feel more like conventional students as they turn up for timetabled lectures, at dedicated study times. This intervention also aids “building community through online discussion” (Skinner & Derounian, 2008). Furthermore, Garrison and Anderson (2003: 22) go on to suggest that “online discussion is a significant tool for realising the potential of e-learning in higher education.”

## How the intervention engages students

This intervention supports, enables and engages students because such online sessions are staged at times and dates mutually agreed by staff and students, so there is a degree of ownership from those taking part. Distance learners also enjoy the mixed social and study interaction rather than just studying solo in locations scattered across England and Wales (students on the course are from as far away as Yorkshire, Staffordshire, Essex, Cornwall and County Durham). The most distant student, to date, studied and successfully completed her qualification from the Bolivian jungle!

The online contact and interaction is very student-focused; giving them opportunities to discuss, with the tutor and peers, assignment concerns and possibilities, as well as specific content that the tutor seeks to cover. Following such a session the tutor posts session notes for reference, both for participants and those who have not been able to “attend”.

## Link to the What Works? findings

As Janet MacDonald notes in *Blended learning and online tutoring* (2006: 15) that tutors use “a range of both online technologies and more conventional methods to support their students”. This intervention, in the form of online synchronous contact sessions, should be viewed as *just one* of a whole host of support and contact mechanisms used, including: face-to-face residential schools held at the university campus (Cheltenham, English West Midlands); local tutorials held in Cheltenham and around the country by mutual agreement between groups of students and staff; telephone/conference tutorials; email and Moodle advice and commentary on draft assignments; online interaction with students on individual Moodle module sites; and face-to-face meetings by appointment. Also, asynchronous “discussion supported the establishment of an ‘online community’”, and reinforces the experience of real-time synchronous sessions, and helps students and staff to become familiar and comfortable with the technology.

## Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Synchronous online contact sessions are evidently effective, popular and useful, not least because students request more of them. It is also salutary to count the number, range and quality of contributions from a diverse range of students over a one-to two-hour slot. Perhaps because these are mature students who are in work and have considerable life experience, most are in evidence during these encounters; there are few absentees, lurkers or ghosts. Towards the end of each synchronous session, students are invited to post comments reflecting on their experience of the session. Was it useful? Did it enable them to address concerns and opportunities in relation to a topic or assignment? What could be done better next time? In addition, some online participants choose to email the tutor with comments, rather than publishing comments for all to see. Such Internet-mediated connections also enable guest practitioners and contributors to make an input to teaching, without them physically leaving their office thereby contributing to sustainability and reducing travel, cost and carbon emissions.

Another aspect of effectiveness is that students sometimes choose to meet each other in person or online, or conduct discussions by telephone and email, in pursuit of their studies. Peer support groups spontaneously emerge where students in a particular locality (for example, Cambridgeshire, Shropshire) choose to interact for mutual support, solidarity and to exchange study approaches, contacts and sources. So, again, the online synchronous contacts are but one complementary approach. Another aspect of “success”, or that these online encounters “work”, is that this is an opportunity for the willing, with no requirement to engage. Or in the words of the adage, better one volunteer than ten people who are forced to join in. Participants do so of their own free will; similarly the level and extent of contributions is largely down to the individual.

Students become used to using Moodle over the course of their studies, since every module has its own dedicated Moodle site. So students’ (part-time) exposure to Moodle is over 2, 4 or 6 years, respectively, if they are studying for a CertHE, FdA or Honours degree. Furthermore it is not uncommon to find students referencing themselves or each other from synchronous contributions in assignments. Many of the students are English parish or town council clerks, part of whose responsibility is to maintain and service their own employer’s website. As Skinner and Derounian (2008: 57) argue, “online networking is a valuable tool for students in higher education and in the world of work.”

## Conclusion

American academics Liu and Ginther (1999) conclude, “In sum, distance education establishes a system that provides learning opportunities to various groups of learners who have no access to the traditional, higher education institutions.”

- Institutions and colleagues are encouraged to consider and try out synchronous online contact sessions. In particular, to see these as an opportunity for all students; whether campus-based or at a distance from university. Or, indeed, as a means of facilitating a connection between the two student groups.
- This intervention is but one approach in an armoury of complementary delivery mechanisms, that include face-to-face residential schools held at a university campus; local tutorials staged around the country by mutual agreement between groups of students and staff; telephone/conference tutorials; email and Moodle advice and commentary on draft assignments; online interaction with students on an individual basis; Moodle module sites; plus face-to-face meetings by appointment. Also asynchronous online interaction and exchange.

- This intervention is built on the willingness of both staff and students. To succeed there has to be commitment to try out and participate (constructively).

In summary, “blended learning is consistent with the values of traditional higher education institutions and it has proven the potential to enhance both the effectiveness and efficiency of meaningful learning experiences” (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004).

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## Website

<http://www.glos.ac.uk/courses/undergraduate/ceg/Pages/entry2012.aspx>

## Related Publications, Resources and Further Information

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# The impact of Academic Skills Centres on retention, progression and attainment and improving student confidence

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## Keywords

- academic skills
- attainment
- student engagement
- retention
- progression

## Nature of intervention

Kingston University's Academic Skills Centres constitute an institution-wide academic support resource for the development and enhancement of students' academic skills.

## Focus of intervention

The intervention is aimed at enhancing students' academic and transferrable skills and subsequently improving attainment. Transferrable skills include: written and oral communication, team work, mathematics, time management, and referencing.

## Description of intervention

The Academic Skills Centres were implemented on all university campuses to provide tailored disciplinary support to students at Kingston University as part of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (Kingston University, 2009). The intervention aimed to extend and enhance existing support by ensuring that undergraduates and postgraduates on all of the university's campuses could access learning support that closely aligned with disciplinary criteria. In addition to providing a supportive academic resource, the intervention also aimed to improve the student experience of learning and teaching within the institution. Therefore, it incorporates a diverse and flexible range of learning and teaching strategies, to meet the increasingly diverse needs of students, in an environment of technological advances, alongside changes in expectations, approaches to learning, and learning styles. The Academic Skills Centres make a significant contribution to students' learning experiences by engaging them to become autonomous learners in an informal environment where they receive feedback on draft assignments and from this can practise and develop a range of skills such as essay and report writing, mathematics, referencing and researching, prior to submission. Thus, the overall aim of the Academic Skills Centres is to engage students as *active* participants in learning, teaching and assessment processes.

The initiative was developed against a backdrop of government drivers and institutional policies aiming to improve the student experience (Browne, 2010), by focusing on increasing students' employability through the development of generic skills (Leitch, 2006; Myers and Gibsen, 2010). The provision is however also tailored to address curricular aims and objectives. In addition to working towards the improvement of students' transferrable skills, the intervention employs students who inform the ongoing activities and develop some of the materials alongside academic staff and the Academic Skills Centres director, reflecting the recent proposal to put students at the heart of the system (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011).

Academic Skills Centres are located in highly visible spaces such as the Learning Resource Centres and the main teaching buildings, to make them easily accessible. They provide students with face-to-face drop-in support whereby they can take their draft assignments for formative advice and guidance. The assignments can then be amended prior to submission for grading. In addition the Academic Skills Centres adopt a range of flexible approaches and techniques to deliver the service including online resources, workshops and discipline specific skills sessions. Some of the online resources and hard copy materials have been developed by students and the workshops are mainly delivered by postgraduates. Thus students inform, develop and deliver aspects of the provision in consultation with faculty staff and the Academic Skills Centres director who oversees embedding of academic skills across the institution and provides training for all staff.

The advisors working in the centres are either academic staff recruited from each faculty, or trained student advisors recruited from level five through to level eight. Engaging students in the self-development of transferrable skills is considered of fundamental importance (Allibone and Gray, 2010) and evidence suggests that this is achieved through dialogue that

promotes critical thinking, reflection and problem solving (Biggs, 2006). The Academic Skills Centres director has adopted this approach to develop an intervention that not only enhances the skills of attendees, but also draws on the skills and competencies of staff and students delivering the support. It also uses feedback on experience to inform ongoing enhancements to the provision (Allibone and Ibsen, 2010).

### How the intervention engages students

Students are engaged in numerous ways. Firstly, they inform the development/enhancement of the intervention through feedback based on their observations and perceptions about the provision. Secondly, this has led to the development of resources by students for students. For example, one student developed a range of maths videos following evaluation of a maths intervention which identified the most commonly sought maths advice (Allibone and Ibsen, 2010). Thirdly, students are engaged in the provision through collaborative research involving staff and student partners, undertaking projects evaluating student and staff perceptions of the efficacy of both the Academic Skills Centres provision and academic skills delivery within the curriculum (Allibone and Ibsen, forthcoming 2013). Finally, students deliver workshops on academic skills such as critical thinking, academic writing and plagiarism. Academic Skills Centres also engage attendees by encouraging them to maintain links between the centres and their disciplinary contexts. This is achieved through an attendance feedback form that is used as a “feedback loop” so that staff delivering the curriculum can comment upon the advice students on their courses have been given in the Academic Skills Centres. Through this mechanism, the academic advisors and academic staff in the disciplines collaboratively produce feedback on student work to improve individual students’ skills development.

### Link to the What Works? findings

The intervention links to the What Works? (2012) findings through provision of a mainstream intervention that is available for all students by creating a “sense of belonging”. It is delivered in an “academic sphere” that nurtures participation through a feedback loop, which engenders collaboration between staff and students that breaks down institutional hierarchies resulting in a cooperative environment. The Academic Skills Centres adopt a student-centred approach by implementing a peer to peer support service that facilitates “meaningful interactions” in order to enhance students’ skills development and deepen their “knowledge and identity as successful learners”. Feedback from qualitative evaluations indicates that attending the Academic Skills Centres can improve confidence and nurture a “sense of identity” that is relevant to attendees’ (users’) “future goals and interests” by enhancing their transferable skills and potential for employability. With respect to the academic advisors delivering the service, employment in the Academic Skills Centres enhances their CVs and thus meets the aims of the employability agenda more directly. Finally, the Academic Skills Centres adopt the philosophy of “academic literacies” espoused by Lea (2004), and thus make clear connections between the role of feedback, the expectations of staff, and the ongoing development and enhancement of skills.

The case study outlined below draws on evaluation data from one of the Academic Skills Centres to indicate impact in relation to attendance, retention and attainment. Data analysed from a healthcare module mirror these findings.

### Evidence of effectiveness/impact

The efficacy of the Business and Law Academic Skills Centre is considered here by linking the routinely gathered attendance information with centrally held student records. During the academic year 2011–12, the centre was used 1,265 times by 711 students. The attendees included undergraduates, postgraduates, and Erasmus students on each year of their programmes.

	Attendees	Progressed to year 2	Non-attendees	Progressed to year 2
Law	39	92%	212	73%
Business	163	87%	728	70%

**Table 1: Business and Law Academic Skills Centre**

A significant association was found between Business and Law Academic Skills Centre attendees and progression to year 2 for both the Business and Law cohorts ( $P < 0.05$ ), suggesting that attendees are more likely to progress.

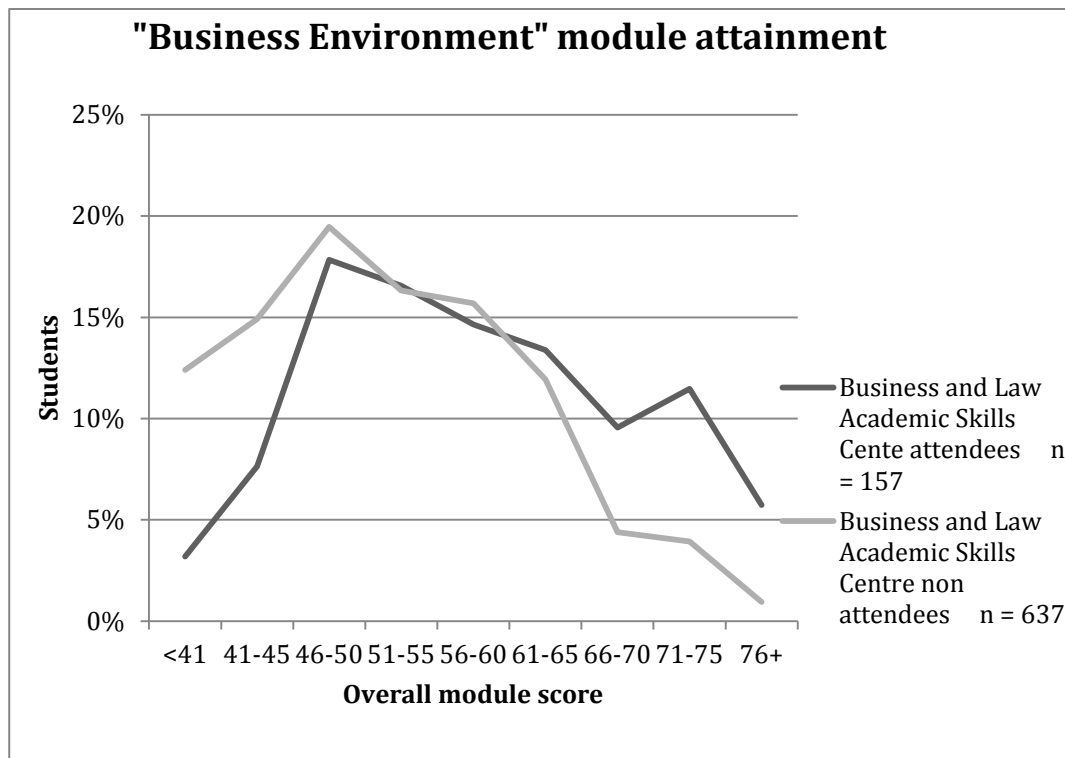
Variation in attainment (excluding those with marks of zero) between attendees and non-attendees has been measured through analysis of the results from a core module Business Environment taken by 794 first-year students of which 157 attended the Business and Law Academic Skills Centre at least once. Figure 1 indicates that while the modal mark was constant across the cohorts, Business and Law Academic Skills Centre attendees were less likely to attain the lowest marks and more likely to attain the highest marks; resulting in significant difference in the mean average marks, as shown in Table 2.



	Attendance at Business and Law Academic Skills Centre (n=157)		Non-attendance at Business and Law Academic Skills Centre (n=637)	
	Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev
Examination	59.5	17.5	52.4	15.1
Coursework	56.7	8.3	51.2	9.0

**Table 2: Business Environment first year core module results**

This initial analysis points to benefits of Academic Skills Centre attendance in terms of progression and attainment. Further work, including analysis of qualitative data obtained from interviews with students, is being conducted to assess their perceptions about the effectiveness of the service regarding the extent to which this flexible approach to academic support is helping them develop more autonomous learning styles and techniques.



**Figure 1: Graph illustrating Business Environment module attainment**

### Conclusion

It has been demonstrated here that the Academic Skills Centres impact on attainment, retention and progression by supporting and enabling students to develop both their disciplinary and transferable, generic skills by accessing a mainstream intervention. The Academic Skill Centres were developed with an underpinning philosophy of student centeredness that empowers students delivering the service and those in receipt of it as active participants. From the outset, the director of the project has made clear the requirement for a cohesive relationship between staff and students involved in its delivery. Subsequently, it has been designed, developed and delivered collaboratively, which has been rewarding in numerous ways. For example, students providing the service have benefitted by enhancing their transferrable skills through delivery of workshops, designing and disseminating online resources and delivering face-to-face academic support to peers attending the centres. This has enhanced their opportunities for employment beyond disciplinary boundaries and some of these trained skills advisors have gone on to work in academic and pastoral support roles after graduation.

Through nurturing an environment that includes a mechanism for feeding information back and forward between the intervention and the curriculum, the project director has developed a resource that actively encourages collaboration and cooperation. This has assisted in the identification and support of individual students in a more holistic way, both within and beyond the curriculum. It has also engendered a shifting hierarchy between staff and students who collaborate in this process. The quantitative data presented here illustrates the direct impact that attendance at an Academic Skills Centre can have on progression and attainment compared to non-attendees in the same cohorts. Qualitative data collected by the Academic Skills Centres director and others has also pointed to improved student confidence when approaching their studies. Therefore, the Academic Skills Centres demonstrate clear links to the What Works? findings (2012) relating to effective pedagogical and institutional practice by enabling students to develop a sense of belonging and identity within the institution and empowering them to develop their knowledge and skills, which may assist them to achieve their future goals.

## Recommendations for practice

The suggestions below are based on experience and modifications made since the outset of the project. It is also a fundamental requirement that strategic enablers are in place, including human and economic resources and support from senior staff within an institution. Future work might assess the relationship between attendance and a sense of belonging more directly through qualitative surveys and interviews. On an operational level however, we recommend:

- that a feedback mechanism between the service and those teaching the curriculum is implemented;
- adopting a flexible approach to design and delivery of resources and materials;
- ensuring the provision is highly visible;
- developing an effective training package;
- building in an evaluation method that links attendance data with student records;
- ensuring a high profile in student communications and marketing.

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# End-of-week reflective meetings to support clinical assistantships and acute care teaching for final-year medical students

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## Keywords

- clinical practice
- reflection
- mentoring
- peer education

## Nature of intervention

A blended academic and professional intervention, supporting medical students of the acute and critical care course, preparing them for practice.

## Focus of intervention

A series of end-of-week meetings to enable students to reflect on clinical experience, improve clinical reasoning skills and improve presentation skills.

## Description of intervention

In 2009 the General Medical Council (GMC) issued guidance in *Tomorrow's Doctors* that medical students should undertake clinical assistantships before graduation. Assistantships require the student to shadow a Foundation Doctor (a doctor in their first postgraduate year) and undertake some of their duties under supervision in order to prepare for the workplace following graduation. At Keele University, final-year students spend one semester in general practice and one semester in hospital. The hospital semester comprises assistantships in medicine and surgery for five weeks each, and a five-week taught acute and critical care course. The assistantships provide valuable experience working as part of the clinical teams to prepare the students for clinical responsibility post-graduation. However, students may be exposed to challenging cases which their Foundation Doctor colleagues may not have the experience to debrief effectively (Travabie and Baker, 2011). The acute and critical care course is taught in fast-paced clinical environments such as the accident and emergency department and intensive care unit where thorough explanation, teaching and feedback may be compromised by the urgent demands of patient care (Shen *et al.*, 2003).

In order to address these potential issues, end-of-week meetings were incorporated into the final-year curriculum to provide a forum for reflection and case discussion lasting around an hour-and-a-half every Friday afternoon throughout the hospital semester. These meetings are facilitated by clinical teaching fellows: trainee doctors (post-membership) undertaking a one-year university placement to gain skills in medical education. The meetings are structured as a "round table" session to encourage free participation and group discussion. Each student is expected to present one case per placement, i.e., 3 presentations in the fifteen-week hospital semester. Intended learning outcomes of the end-of-week meetings included:

- reflection on clinical experience;
- improved clinical reasoning skills;
- improved presentation skills.

Each group of approximately ten students meets with the same clinical teaching fellow every week throughout their hospital placement. This takes place in a university building on the hospital site and is the only timetabled activity where students meet formally with university faculty. Meetings often start with a general trouble-shooting discussion where students discuss any administrative or supervision issues, so they can be addressed quickly and efficiently. Thereafter, two or three students present clinical cases in which they have been involved that week. It is stressed at the start of the placement that the students should present a case that has encouraged them to reflect on their practice and progression. The case is then discussed with the group and the clinical teaching fellow, with a focus on reflection, clinical reasoning and decision-making, and sometimes a wider discussion addressing ethical and professionalism issues. These presentations allow the students to gain experience in teaching skills, which are important for all medical graduates (GMC, 2009).

Students also learn from the diversity of their peers' workplace-based learning events. Thus a student based in a cardiology ward, for example, can learn about a colleague's experiences in respiratory medicine and broaden the spectrum of their clinical knowledge.

The end-of-week meetings have facilitated pastoral care for some students. This was not an intended outcome; however the informal nature of the meetings and the regular weekly contact has fostered a rapport between the students and the clinical teaching fellows and some students have felt able to raise clinical and personal difficulties on a one-to-one basis, forming a mentoring relationship. Clinical teaching fellows are supported by senior faculty (including the student support service) to ensure that any difficulties identified are managed through the proper channels. Problems addressed in this way include students feeling unsupported by clinical staff, disagreement between students regarding access to learning opportunities, and inappropriately negative feedback being given during ward-based teaching.

Though the end-of-week meetings are a forum for reflection and case discussion, final-year students are often understandably preoccupied by their forthcoming exams. Medicine is a profession in which there is often a diversity of opinion regarding the management of certain conditions and this can lead to confusion regarding the correct way to answer exam questions. Students have used the end-of-week meetings as an opportunity to clarify any inconsistencies encountered during their exam preparation. Informal learning outcomes of the end-of-week meetings included:

- improved clinical knowledge;
- help with emotional and professionalism issues;
- exam preparation.

### **How the intervention engages students**

The assistantship is a transitional period where students spend the majority of their time integrated into clinical teams rather than with other students and university faculty. It is known that students find transitional periods stressful, including the transition between medical school and the workplace (Radcliffe and Lester, 2003). End-of-week meetings offer students the opportunity for regular discussion with their peers, which can be a helpful strategy for managing stress (Lee and Graham, 2001).

Students are required to maintain a portfolio throughout their undergraduate training, and this should include evidence to demonstrate the development of presentation and teaching skills. The end-of-week meetings create a non-intimidating arena in which students may gain this experience and receive verbal and written feedback from their peers and clinical teaching fellow, supporting further development and providing evidence for their portfolio.

In arranging the meetings for late on Friday afternoons, it was anticipated that the timing of the meetings may not be greeted with enthusiasm by the students. However, this timing is deliberate, to encourage students to spend maximal time on the wards, thus taking full advantage of the learning potential of each assistantship period. Furthermore the timing allows the students to debrief on a continuous week of learning experiences, without the interruption of the weekend.

With this in mind, the sessions were designed as a pleasant and informal way to conclude their working week. Use of trainee-level members of the teaching faculty, a non-hierarchical meeting structure and the provision of refreshments creates a relaxed atmosphere, which facilitates active group participation. As previously stated, it also creates an environment for the provision of pastoral care for those students who identify the need for further support.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

At the end of each semester, all students attending the final end-of-week session were asked to complete an evaluation questionnaire for the end-of-week meetings pertaining to both the hospital-based assistantships and the acute and critical care course. Five-point Likert scales were used to measure agreement with statements aligned with the intended and informal learning outcomes (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), and free-text boxes for comments regarding the main benefits of the meetings and areas for improvement were included. Median, mode, range and inter-quartile ranges (IQR) were calculated from the Likert scale data and thematic analysis of the free-text boxes was undertaken. Of 63 students, 58 completed the evaluation questionnaire.

#### **Intended learning outcomes**

Students consistently agreed that the end-of-week meetings helped them to reflect on their learning (median 4, mode 4, range 2-5, IQR 0) and improved their clinical reasoning skills (median 4, mode 4, range 2-5, IQR 0). Students also agreed that their presentation skills were improved by the end-of-week meetings, though there was a broader spread of responses (median 4, mode 4, range 3-5, IQR 1).

### Informal learning outcomes

Students consistently agreed that their clinical knowledge was improved by participating in the end-of-week meetings (median 4, mode 4, range 2-5, IQR 0). The meetings were also perceived as useful preparation for exams (median 4, mode 4, range 1-5, IQR 1) and helpful in dealing with pastoral issues (median 4, mode 3.5, range 1-5, IQR 1), though with a broader spread of responses.

### Main benefits of end-of-week meetings

Four major themes emerged from the free text describing the main benefits of the end-of-week meetings. The most common theme relates to the exposure to a variety of cases that students would otherwise not have seen. This provides further evidence of the acquisition of additional clinical knowledge. Other major themes included the pastoral role of the meetings, improving presentations skills, and the benefits of regular contact with other medical students during the assistantships.

### Areas for improvement of end-of-week meetings

Three major themes emerged from the free text concerning areas for improvement. The most common was a desire for more formal teaching from the faculty. This is a frequent finding in the evaluation of courses with a significant self-directed component, and to alter this would detract from the reflective nature of the end-of-week meetings. The other major themes related to a perceived need for specific learning objectives for each week to be set in advance, and a preference for the meetings to be held at a different time (usually earlier in the week).

### Conclusion

The results of the evaluation questionnaire indicate that students agreed that the end-of-week meetings achieved their intended learning outcomes and also provided additional benefits in terms of knowledge acquisition, pastoral care and exam preparation. It is possible that clinical assistantships may limit the amount of contact medical students have with their peers and the end-of-week meetings appear to mitigate this, providing a forum for peer education and support.

Clinical assistantships were first introduced to the Keele University undergraduate medical curriculum in the academic year 2011–12, and Keele is one of the first medical schools in the UK to implement this learning strategy. It is probable, in view of the GMC guidance (2009), that other medical schools will introduce assistantships into their curricula in the near future.

The clinical assistantship is a period where medical students must prepare for the workplace. It is important that students are offered support in all transitional periods, not only at the beginning of their university education but also at the end. Our model of weekly reflective meetings is an example of effective practice in this area, and could be adapted for training in other healthcare professions or any vocational course in higher education.

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## Retention support officers: A bridge to support and success

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### Keywords

- support
- bridge
- cross-institutional
- local
- belonging
- engagement

### Nature of intervention

Cross-institutional initiative designed to support student engagement and belonging: centrally managed student support officers who are based in a faculty context provide a local bridge to help all students.

Focus of intervention

The intervention is primarily social, but in a school (or faculty) context. The role has academic links and is managed from a learning and teaching development department to maintain the focus on students' engagement with their learning and the programme.

### Description of intervention

The role of the retention support officer was established at Teesside in 2004 in one school, the School of Social Sciences and Law. Its effectiveness was evaluated in 2005 as part of a wider European Social Fund research project, which examined why students stay or leave (Teesside University Retention Team, 2005). The project evaluated six local strategies, one of which was this role. Because of the role's success it was expanded to all schools in the university in 2005–06. There is one retention support officer (RSO) in each school, offering students support. The role is not academic, but works with academic and administrative staff in the school. The role does not provide counselling, or academic advice, but rather acts as a friendly ear, and bridge, to academic or other professional support. Teesside's students are primarily first generation, and many are local. The research project mentioned above showed us that they do not always feel confident enough to approach academic staff for help, and because of the nature of academic work, academic staff may seem inaccessible and appointment systems set up to access staff may seem intimidating. Some students may also be reluctant to access specialist help via student services.

The RSO role in each school works in slightly different ways depending on the specific needs and culture of the school. So for example in Science and Engineering, students approached the RSO because they were having difficulties with technical aspects of their course, but didn't feel comfortable approaching the tutor. The RSO worked with the tutor and peer mentors in the school to set up a lunchtime workshop to revisit the technical areas in an informal small group setting. In the School of Computing, the RSO set up an online support site, with access to online mentors. In Social Sciences and Law, the RSO runs a help desk, which she staffs some days, and is staffed by students on other days, and it is also used by other services on monthly rotation to promote their services to students, for example, a subject librarian and financial support services. But while each RSO has developed local strategies to support retention in conjunction with local academic and administrative staff, they also act as a friendly contact for students in their area. They introduce themselves in welcome week and have a public visibility. The post-holders are selected for their approachability as well as their negotiation skills. The six RSOs meet fortnightly to share good practice and support each other. They are line-managed from a central learning and teaching development department.

The post has been in place for seven years and it has become apparent there are key factors that make the role so effective:

- It is based in a school and is locally owned but line-managed centrally.
- The RSOs are a team who support each other and learn from each other. The post has been incrementally more successful since there has been one in every school.
- That it is a bridging role; that it is student focused; that the RSO knows their priority is the student; that it is recognised across the university as a key role and is valued as such by senior managers;
- It is owned by learning and teaching and therefore has a focus on student achievement and success as well as retention. This ownership also highlights the importance of the ongoing role of the academic arena, and a student's discipline and learning environment, in supporting retention.

## How the intervention engages students

The RSO scheme does several key things to engage students and promote their success. It is important to note that while the RSOs are contracted as retention support officers, the title used in the local context is “student support officer”. The title on the contract is important as it ensures that the role isn’t absorbed into doing local administration, which can be an ongoing challenge for a role unique to each school. However, we’ve found students prefer the name “student support officer”.

- The presence of a student support officer helps students and their parents see that the university cares about students locally.
- The RSO follows up on students who are not attending or have missed assignments in a supportive way, and where appropriate, the RSO supports students to get help from other services, enabling them to return to study.
- The RSO is visibly around to help, and is accessed by students who are finding it difficult to speak to their tutors. The RSO then helps them make contact.
- The RSO takes care of students who miss welcome week and picks up on students who miss other key transition activities or processes.
- The RSO can do a focus group with students on a module or programme to identify any issues or concerns and then work with the teaching team and with a central learning and teaching lecturer to identify strategies to support student success.
- The RSO can do supportive exit interviews with students (to support their future plans and to identify reasons for withdrawal). As the RSO is not a member of the programme team, students can often be more open with them about their reasons for leaving. So their role contributes to richer data on student withdrawals.
- The RSO answers the “dumb questions” that students feel foolish asking but which can be vital to success. (Where do I hand in my work? What does this word mean? Is it OK to call my lecturer by their first name?)
- The RSO acts as a bridge to engagement for many students who otherwise may feel disconnected from their programme, school or the university. RSOs for example put students into contact with each other and work with student mentors and academic staff to help all students on a programme to become involved and belong.
- The RSOs often work with academic and administrative staff to review data and help to understand patterns and identify possible ways to address concerns.

## Link to the What Works? findings

The role of retention support officer and how it is managed at Teesside is focused on providing mechanisms to support student engagement and nurture belonging both locally and institutionally, which is a vital characteristic of successful initiatives according to the What Works? report (Thomas, 2012). The role is valued by senior managers, local academics and central support staff, and is considered part of a strategic approach to retention and developing a culture of belonging (Thomas, 2012). The role is based in a faculty context and the support officers work with local programme leaders and lecturers to help students connect with their programme, their peers and their tutors. This activity, while focused on support, is underpinned by a strong emphasis on learning and curriculum engagement, and on participation in the academic sphere (Thomas, 2012).

## Evidence of effectiveness/impact

The role has been evaluated in a variety of ways since it was set up. We review retention statistics annually, collect feedback from staff and students and do reflective work with the team of RSOs on at least an annual basis. The RSOs also meet annually with the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Student Experience) to explore both the role and what is happening for students in the schools.

When the role was established, the withdrawal rate was 21%. It is now less than 10%. Almost every year since the role was introduced into all schools, the withdrawal rate has continued to drop and it has continued to improve on the HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) benchmark targets. Other retention strategies and activities have been introduced in the same period and it is obviously difficult to identify which aspect of this ongoing improvement is a result of the role and which relates to other activities. However, within the first year of its establishment, the withdrawal rate dropped by almost 3% and in the subsequent year by a similar amount. Since then the rate has settled somewhat, although still with some ongoing improvement.

Other evidence of success comes from the feedback provided by staff and students, which has been overwhelmingly positive. Many students have cited the RSO as the reason they stayed. In fact, further than this some students identify the RSO as key to helping them settle in, engage with their learning and establish a sense of belonging within the university. As one late-arriving student said:

*“The Student Support Officer couldn’t have been more helpful. She helped me find the information I needed and introduced me to some other students on the course, who I’m still friends with.”*

The staff have also commented on the value of the role, positively identifying the way the role directly supports students, but also highlighting the value of the role for supporting them in their interactions with students. Academic, administrative and student services staff have identified the role as providing invaluable connections. Among academics the RSOs are increasingly

appreciated for their help with developing student belonging on modules and programmes. In more recent years, the RSOs have become more involved in helping programme teams access students' views more effectively and work with students in developing curricula.

Early on in the scheme, some academic staff commented in particular on the impact on attendance:

“... having ... a Retention Officer has really begun to make a difference to the programme in terms of attendance. Many of our students who were poor attenders in the first few weeks, are now attending regularly. Also feedback from students is that they really appreciate having an approachable, friendly and helpful person who they can go to if they're having problems.” (Greer and Nutt, 2009).

More recently a school assistant dean highlighted the bridging aspects of the role:

“*Jamie [the RSO – name anonymised] is providing a vital role in our new student engagement strategy, helping us direct students who need help to the right people.*”

## Conclusion

The National Audit Office (2007) retention report identified Teesside's Retention Team and the role of the RSOs as an example of good practice, and HEFCE too has commended the retention work at Teesside. The post has now been in place across the university for seven years and has adapted and changed somewhat to cope with ongoing changes in a dynamic university, which is itself adapting to significant changes in higher education.

The retention support officers have been a very valuable part of Teesside's ongoing retention strategy and continue to support student engagement and success. Over the time the post has been in place, Teesside has seen ongoing improvements in retention. The RSOs play an important part in helping students engage effectively with their studies and cope with challenges that arise. As well as acting as a bridge between students and help, the RSO role over time has come to act as a bridge between support arenas and the academic sphere for both students and staff, and so potentially can become more effective in promoting student engagement and creating a culture of belonging.

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## Retaining non-standard students in health and social care

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### Keywords

- non-standard nursing students
- attrition

### Nature of intervention

Student experience and enhancement for non-standard nursing students in the School of Health and Social Care at Bournemouth University and the introduction of a one point of contact, the Tracking Tutor.

### Focus of intervention

The intervention is of an academic and professional nature.

### Description of intervention

This paper offers an overview of the development of the undergraduate nursing pre-registration Tracking Tutor (TT) in the School of Health and Social Care (HSC) at Bournemouth University (BU). This tutor manages nursing students who either interrupt their studies or who are considering leaving the programme. It highlights how the role benefits students to complete their studies, the organisation to minimising attrition and the Nursing profession as students gain entry to the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) (2010). It also explores how to competently undertake this role and develop key skill sets, which are being advised, supported, co-ordinated and documented. This paper begins with assertions as to why the role is deemed necessary.

The 21st century has seen a changing higher education (HE) landscape with many individuals entering HE who do not “fit” with the traditional view of a young single person who, having just completed their A-levels, continues with their education. Undergraduate pre-registration nursing students can be any age, any ethnicity, any sexuality and can have a multitude of needs. However, this complexity often brings such demands on a student that they discontinue their studies (Davies and Elias, 2003). This, consequently, increases attrition and, for the university business, has financial implications (Further and Higher Education Access Bill, 2011). It also has consequences for health service providers whose mentors are often working through lateness, absenteeism or/and de-motivation with the troubled student. For the health service, a nursing student who discontinues their studies, despite their potential for offering high-quality health care, is lost to the profession as they fail to gain registration.

Attracting mature students has been a target of widening participation strategies for many years and *A new University Challenge* (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2008) highlighted the need to develop HE strategies which led to inclusivity and participation; and while HE welcomed and embedded this inclusivity, such inclusivity brought about new challenges. Indeed, while some 25 years ago the average age of a student nurse was about 20, today it is nearly 30, and it is not surprising that this age group often has caring responsibilities. According to the Department for Education and Skills (2002 and 2004), about a quarter of HE students are student parents. Consequently evidence suggests that often these students face challenges that are very complex or/and expensive to overcome. One example is the requirement to undertake practice placements. Here many nursing students describe practice experiences as “going to work” and this, associated with their studies and complex personal lives, increases their stress levels, which is often attributed to financial worries such as childcare arrangements. This stress leads to absenteeism and attrition, and a key directive of the UK Health and Safety Executive (2010) and Health Service Commission (2008) highlights that management of work-related stress, and appropriate support, has a direct association with reduced absenteeism and reduced attrition, hence management is key to the TT role.

For the university as a business, attrition equals lost income. Today, educating a nurse costs approximately £40k. This includes expenses such as university fees, a bursary, allowances such as child tax credit, council tax exemption and travel expenses, and consequently if a student withdraws from the programme, this represents not only a financial implication for the university, but also one for society as a whole, which may be perceived as wasted money.

In BU there was clear anecdotal evidence that students who were either required to repeat units/modules of study or who wished to suspend/defer their programme or take maternity/paternity leave were receiving contradictory advice. Consequently, to manage complex students, BU introduced a TT as a 'one point of contact'. To undertake this role effectively, the TT needed to have comprehensive knowledge of placement providers, Strategic Health Authority and Government funding, Nursing and Midwifery Council requirements and university processes and procedures and therefore is a senior lecturer grade.

Nursing programmes are complex as students not only undertake standard academic credits required for a degree but also need to achieve practice outcomes (known as competencies or proficiencies), which require 2,300 practice hours over three years (as set by the NMC) and managing this is demanding. Whilst students in HE often feel challenged by academia, many students undertaking nursing describe the extra requirements of practice, and the associated management of their personal lives, as very stressful and unachievable, and subsequently they either fail a unit or decide to discontinue or suspend their course. Indeed, Davies and Elias (2003) highlighted that non-academic personal reasons was the most significant reason for dropping out of university, hence BU deemed that extra support of the TT was necessary.

Due to failure rates of between 4% and 11%, BU nursing students are required to repeat one or more units (units may include practice) and therefore do not proceed into the next year of the programme (or for final year students, complete the course). Consequently, they spend between six months and one year repeating the unit(s) as a part-time student and are no longer part of their original study group. Students who fail are more likely to become disillusioned and therefore to disengage academically, which in turn has a negative impact on academic performance (Pitt *et al.*, 2012), and thus the cycle of failure continues. This failure, and change of circumstance, results in the potential to become isolated and feel a lack of direction, confidence and motivation to continue and succeed. These emotions are known to have a negative impact on student success (see Freitas and Leonard, 2011), which add towards attrition (Jeffreys 2007). Dearnley and Matthew (2007) propose that a cycle of academic success which increases confidence and motivation are poignant factors that contribute towards achievement. Here effective intervention that helps students to engage and succeed falls largely into three categories: advice and support; co-ordination; and documentation.

### **How the intervention engages students**

Repeating students have a tutorial with the TT where clarification of their situation and implications are discussed. Often they are disappointed at the prospect of the change, mistakenly believing that they can retain their study group and continue the academic level. The TT thus enables understanding and processes involved, helping the student accept that this is the route they need to take in order to succeed. Here an action plan is tailored and, on behalf of the student, the TT co-ordinates each plan with academics, such as new personal tutors/academic advisors, unit tutors, BU practice demonstrators, administrative staff and placement colleagues.

The TT also manages students who choose to interrupt their programme due to new childcare demands, such as maternity, paternity and adoption. Here the TT tutorial includes advice and support and the co-ordination and completion of necessary documentation, such as maternity leave/pay forms. Discussion regarding when to take maternity leave and when to return to the programme is of paramount importance as Lidgard (2004), Water (2005) and White (2008) all explore how new childcare demands can be challenging. The TT also helps plan a reduction in practice hours for students in the later stages of pregnancy when they become very tired. This is communicated to the placement allocation team, practice partners, academic and administrative colleagues. Also to ease understanding of this complex process, flow charts have been designed.

Students who decide to interrupt (also known as suspend or defer) their programme are also managed by the TT. Interruptions can be for a number of reasons, such as financial pressures or ill health of the student or family/friends and therefore they may wish to take a break from the pressure that the programme is placing on them. Students who wish to interrupt their studies also meet with the TT, who helps them understand the implications. Firstly, the TT tries to adjust their programme to ease the stresses. This includes possible changes to attendance at university, temporary reduction in placement hours or bringing forward a holiday. This slight alteration can be sufficient for the student, enabling them to remain on the programme. If the student is struggling academically, and contemplating suspension because of this, the TT advises them of the reality of suspension which includes making well the failed units on return and loss of present peer support. Student records are updated and clarification to the student regarding actions is sent via email. Accordingly, liaison and collaboration with the aforementioned staff is vital if the process is to succeed.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

The *What Works?* report (Thomas, 2012) discusses strategies which enable belonging and, as discussed, the Bournemouth University TT strategy for managing non-standard students who have interrupted their studies clearly uses many of them. For example, the discussion highlights how during the TT tutorial, what would work for the individual student and the practical implications of their situation are explored, and the "one point of contact" embraces the concepts of feeling valued, as the TT maintains contact with the student so they do not feel "lost" in the system.

The TT is also instrumental in encouraging students to seek help from other BU professionals, such as student support, who can help with financial issues such as housing benefit and hardship funds. Often students do not seek help from these services

because until needed, they are unknown; this too was noted in “*What Works*” (Thomas, 2012). “*What Works*” highlights the need for management to take responsibility for student engagement and indeed BU senior management have for several years recognised the need for a TT and its long-term benefits in reducing attrition.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

As highlighted above, the TT enables repeating units or interruption to studies to be as smooth as possible, which in turn reduces student stress and helps retention and success. Change in circumstances can be significant for undergraduate nursing students, and the ‘one point of contact’, and associated support, encourages students to remain and complete the programme. In collaboration with the administrative staff, and more recently the Head of Practice Engagement, the TT produces a yearly audit of those who have interrupted their studies. This audit clearly shows that over 75% of students return to the programme and complete within the NMC five-year timeframe. Professional Support Services audits also highlight the increasing number of students accessing them. Indeed BU’s high National Student Survey nursing scores in 2012 (HEFCE, 2012) are an indication of how initiatives such as the TT impact on student experience and satisfaction.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has explored how the TT “one point of contact” and support enhances student experience because the giving of information empowers choices. Empowerment is known to reduce attrition (Bowden, 2008) and the implementation of the TT who advises, devises and co-ordinates a plan that meets the students’ needs has proved to be invaluable. Students no longer become “lost in the system”. Their experience is greatly enhanced by fairness and transparency, academic engagement and performance, collaboration and partnership-working. As a result, there is an increase in student success and achievement, a decline in loss to the nursing profession and a reduction in attrition numbers for the university. These processes enable students to know what is expected of them so that they achieve, and helps them feel valued by the organisation. Being valued and having a sense of belonging and not feeling lost or alienated is clearly indicated in “*What Works*” and the authors of this paper highly recommend that other higher education institutes consider implementing the role.

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## Supporting “complicated” trainees through their PGCE year

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### Keywords

- mature students
- career changers
- peer support
- nurturing belongingness
- initial teacher training

### Nature of intervention

The PGCE secondary team at the University of Worcester has facilitated a support group for self-selected mature students with “complicated lives”.

### Focus of intervention

The intervention is both social and professional. It aims to improve the experience and retention of mature trainee secondary teachers on teaching practice and at university during their PGCE year.

### Description of intervention

Each year on the PGCE secondary course, there is a significant proportion of trainees who have complicated lives. They tend to be mature students, or career changers, often with family commitments. Each of these factors makes following the PGCE programme more challenging for them in comparison to the rest of the cohort. Over the years we have identified this group as being at high risk of failing to complete the course; this is despite being highly motivated when the course begins.

At the end of 2010, a focus group of mature trainee teachers identified a number of issues that were particularly pertinent to them. These fell into four broad categories:

- conflicts caused by course pressures on family time;
- lifestyle differences between younger and older trainees;
- sources of support when things were difficult on placement;
- academic writing after time away from education.

Of these themes, the group felt the first three were the most troublesome. They talked of experiencing a sense of being different to others in the cohort and of having fewer opportunities to engage with the informal social support that younger trainees were able to tap in to. This is exemplified by one trainee’s comments that:

*“There is a divide between age groups – the younger students seem to be able to use each other for support. Whereas older students don’t.”*

40-year-old female Business and Economics trainee

Quintell (2000) found that older students do not tend to mix with younger students partly because they are not interested in doing so, but also because when they would like to, they have responsibilities which make this impossible. That is not to say that all mature students were isolated, however support from peers was constrained by family commitments and limited to contact via social networking and late-night phone calls. One trainee said:

*“... thank goodness for other trainees’ support and redial (to take advantage of free phone calls) after 1hr. (My) Husband does practical stuff at home, but (my) peers listen to the ups and downs of everyday student life in the classroom. They know what I am talking about...”* 43-year-old female Science trainee

At the University of Worcester we have a robust selection process which sets out to give prospective trainees realistic expectations of what the course involves. This would appear to relatively be successful. One member of the focus group stated that he:

“... was prepared for the stresses/pressure/work load – pre interview it was made clear how robust you need to be to do the course especially as a more mature student . . .”

However he also commented that:

“I was taken aback by the reality of the classroom versus the craft of teaching taught in university.” 51-year-old male  
Mathematics trainee

Whilst these challenges are not confined to mature students, the lack of opportunities for informal support may be a contributory factor in the disproportionate numbers of mature students who fail to complete the course.

In 2011, the University of Worcester decided to be proactive and set up a support group specifically for mature students with complicated lives. Its purpose was to provide a semi-structured and supportive environment where mature students could share their experiences, good and bad, with trainees who had similar experiences of juggling university, school placements and home life. This was supplemented by monthly group emails and individual support for specific issues that arose during the year.

Subject tutors introduced the idea of the group to the cohort during the first week of the course, specifically inviting trainees who could be said to have “complicated” lives. The group met once a month in university, during lunchtimes. The group comprised 11 members: three males, eight females, aged between 31 and 49. They were training to be teachers of Science, Design and Technology, Mathematics, English, and Modern Foreign Languages. The majority had dependents and described themselves as outwardly confident. They had all previously been successful in their work – all of them had complicated lives and they christened the group “ITTs Complicated”.

### **How the intervention engages students**

The most important element of the “Complicated” group was to give students a sense of belonging and to create a group identity. This was done by fostering a sense of humour and reminding trainees that, whatever the trials and tribulations of this year, at the end they would realise their ambitions to be teachers

A week before each meeting an email was sent out inviting the group to attend. Each meeting had a focus linked to what was happening on the course at that time. When academic work was due in, it would be about finding time to write. When school reports were due, then the agenda might include “ways to get your mentor to write a positive report”. In March, when the whole cohort was exhausted, not just the complicated group, it was about setting realistic goals and not looking too far ahead.

The group was very much a social affair with shared lunches and coffees, and often home-made cakes, lightening what could have been a rather tense hour. Trainees in the group were able to talk about problems such as being mentored by very young teachers or having their previous life experiences dismissed as irrelevant. Happily, a lot of time was spent celebrating success in the classroom, in the staffroom and with academic writing. Additionally, the group developed a black sense of humour when considering the traumas of plate-smashing teenagers and stropky partners. The most important thing was finding out that actually this was all normal, that others were experiencing the same things and that it would pass.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

The “ITTs Complicated” group was populated by a group of trainee teachers who have invested heavily in the success of their training. This financial, social and emotional investment meant that the consequences of failure were perceived as potentially catastrophic for them as individuals. However, by promoting a sense of belonging through social engagement, taking a proactive approach and seeking to “engage students, rather than waiting for a crisis to occur” (HEFCE, 2011), it was possible to dissipate some of the fears associated with a real or imagined sense of impending doom when things weren’t going well.

The intervention took advantage of the fact that it is beneficial to engage with trainees over time rather than providing one-off intensive support activities. Additionally, collaboration with, and engagement between, trainees and members of staff has been reported to be effective in terms of retention. This is reflected in many of the findings described in the “What works?” interventions but particularly the work of Scott *et al.* (2011), who report on the effectiveness of a lunchtime support group as a forum for undergraduate students to meet informally with academics, and the subsequent improvement on retention.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

The 2011–12 “ITTs Complicated” group was an overwhelming success. Retention and qualification rates far exceeded those for mature students in the cohort as a whole. Overall, 42 mature students started the course with eight failing to complete their training, compared to the 11 “complicated” trainees of whom one has intercalated and will complete his training in 2013; the remaining 10 qualified to teach and gained their PGCE. They have all secured employment – part-time and full-time as their family and life commitments dictated.

This first group continues to flourish, away from the course. Group members are still in touch with the university tutor and with each other both by email, on Facebook and in person. They report that they have found a group of lifelong friends.

When evaluating the impact of the group, one trainee said:

*“It let me know that I was not alone when I was crying with exhaustion and was overwhelmed with negativity.”*

The trainee goes on to state:

*“It made me feel safer that there were other human beings going into teaching who shared a similar experience or world view and could help make teacher training a better place for others in the future.”* Female Science trainee

At the end of the year, the group was interviewed by external examiners who reported that:

“The Group is clearly working effectively – one student saying ‘it helped me stay on the course’, and students wanted it foregrounded to raise awareness earlier of its existence and nature.” UW External Examiner Report, July 2012.

With this in mind the group filmed a series of short interviews and promotional sound bites. This was published on YouTube and the link sent to the new 2012 PGCE cohort prior to the start of the course. This has resulted in a new “Complicated” group which at the time of writing has just had its third meeting. The group has decided to set up an email and Facebook group and is working on preparing an honest and open guide to success for the 2013–14 cohort.

## Conclusion

The Department for Education has prioritised recruitment of trainee teachers to Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Modern Languages. This is incentivised by the provision of substantial bursaries for graduates with the very best degrees (DfE, 2013). Our experience at the University of Worcester is that these subjects attract a disproportionately high number of “complicated” trainees. This is likely to be a continuing theme in recruitment and selection into secondary teaching. Consequently, support of mature career changers with financial and family commitments will also remain a priority in terms of retention.

The key recommendations from the work carried out at the University of Worcester include:

- Make contact with potential group members prior to the start of the course, publicise the group’s presence to the whole cohort during the first weeks of the course and get university tutors to remind all students when meetings are to take place. The decision to get involved may be a gradual process and trainees need lots of opportunities to join in.
- Actively recruit group members. Trainees may be initially reticent about identifying themselves as different to the majority of the cohort and needing a support group. However, once the benefits of belonging to such a group have been experienced, group members are happy to belong. Keep in touch with all group members by email; they may dip in and out of the group but it is important that all group members feel they are welcome to revisit the social group when, and if, it is useful to them.
- From the outset, “complicated trainees” need to recognise the challenges that their life circumstances present whilst following the PGCE programme. However, once these potential difficulties are accepted, then the focus of the intervention should be on identifying positive ways to be a successful trainee teacher.
- Provide a social forum for the self-selecting group to meet and share experiences. It is important that this time is built into the normal timetable and is not an additional burden on trainees’ time and resources.
- Finally, encourage group members to support each other and to share experiences both inside and outside of the group forum. The group should be seen not only as an arena for offloading when things are difficult, but also as a place to celebrate success with a group of likeminded friends.

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Related publications, resources and further information

Group members promotional material :

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PD5VzMlwwt4&feature=youtu>



# Curtin University mentor programme: Connecting every beginning student to a mentor

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## Keywords

- peer mentoring
- peer support
- reciprocity
- student experience
- retention

## Nature of intervention

Curtin University co-ordinates a campus-wide student mentor program in which every commencing undergraduate student is provided with a senior student from their own course as a mentor.

## Focus of intervention

The mentor programme has the goal of enhancing student experience as new students are assisted in making a successful transition into the university. The program effectively manages the risk of new student attrition as mentors assist with campus and information systems orientation, with academic and social components of student life and with connecting new students to support services.

Mentoring relationships are reciprocal (Haggard *et al.*, 2011) and the mentor programme also benefits mentors in a number of ways. For example, socially they are connected to new students, to other mentors and to university staff. Mentors also have opportunities for professional development of high level, transferable skills and competencies, such as leadership, time management and communication skills.

## Description of intervention

At Curtin University in Western Australia, concerns about student retention led to the development of a Student Retention Implementation Plan in 2007 and its formal adoption in 2008, comprising a number of interventions (Curtin University, 2007; 2008). Developing a student mentor programme was considered to have strong potential as an intervention that would impact positively on student retention measures, and was further linked to a number of other key retention initiatives such as early identification of students who are at risk, improving orientation and transition, and connecting students to sources of help in a timely manner. There was a particular focus on ensuring these interventions targeted first year undergraduate students. The key intended outcome of the student mentor programme was therefore to reduce attrition rates amongst beginning undergraduate students. Formal measures of retention indicate that this goal has been achieved. There have also been a range of other outcomes, beneficial to all participants (Elliott *et al.*, 2011).

Over the period 2008 to 2012, the programme has been progressively extended to include every new undergraduate on the main university campus. The fundamental goal of the mentor programme is to engage senior students to assist new students to make a successful transition into the university during the first semester of study (Curtin University, 2011). Mentors provide a welcome at orientation, act as positive role models, are available as a contact for support/advice, and generally enhance the experience of the new student. Developing a model for the mentor programme derived from consultation with professional peers in Australia, and a review of existing literature. A brief overview of the development of the programme is described in Elliott *et al.*, (2011).

The basic structure of the model adopted includes the following features:

- All new students are assigned to a mentor; they may choose to opt out of the programme. This aspect of the programme differentiates it significantly from other mentor programs where new students may apply for a mentor.
- Senior students act as mentors to new students enrolled in the same course – that is, the point in common between mentors and mentees is their course of study.
- A centrally managed training and preparation programme for all mentors is run by START (Student Transition and Retention Team).

- A co-ordinating academic staff member (usually the first year co-ordinator) in each participating teaching area works with the mentors.
- Ongoing support for mentors is provided by START and the co-ordinating staff member in each participating school as the mentor programme is delivered.
- Each mentor is assigned 10 to 15 mentees, who may request a change of mentor if they have concerns. Random assignment, where possible, results in diverse groups of students, which has been a beneficial aspect of the programme. Some local co-ordinators incorporate self-selection of mentors and other mentors work with existing tutorial groups.
- The precise delivery of the programme will vary according to the needs of the participating schools but in most cases the programme operates over the period of one semester.
- A structured evaluation occurs at the end of each semester of the programme with mentors, mentees, and participating staff.
- Student mentors' contribution is formally recognised by the university in the form of an honorarium payment, presentations and comments on their academic transcript.

### **How the intervention engages students**

New students' engagement with the university is facilitated by the mentor programme in a number of ways. During orientation, mentoring groups are usually formed and students are able to meet and interact with other new students as well as their mentor. Mentors assist their mentees to engage with academic and social aspects of the university as they provide information, offer support, and connect new students to each other as well as to relevant staff as needed.

Mentors' engagement with the university is also enhanced. The central training programme includes interactive activities which model collaborative, supportive group processes that can be used with their mentees. Mentors report their enjoyment of working with and getting to know new students, their increased knowledge of university systems and support services, and their increased connections with staff, including a feeling of enhanced status within the university. This is promoted by formal recognition of their role.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

The programme builds a sense of belonging and engagement through peer relationships that offer friendship and support. The ongoing relationship between mentors and programme co-ordinators develops meaningful interaction between staff and students, and also facilitates interaction between those staff and new students. As mentors are drawn from the same teaching area, a stronger sense of identity with the school is fostered. The mentors also provide an effective and positive role model for new students, many of whom subsequently aspire to become mentors themselves.

The mentor programme is centred on students' academic pathways, and is consequently directly relevant to the immediate demands facing new students. Mentors are often engaged in volunteer organisations or are student members of professional bodies and organisations. Such mentors act as role models, encouraging mentees to join and actively engage in similar activities which lead to the acquisition of professional skills and the formation of networks in preparation for their entry into the workforce. Some mentors develop their professional identity further and become mentees in the NEXT STEP mentor program whereby students are mentored by Curtin alumni in relation to networking, job application preparation and realistic future career goals based on an understanding of their industry.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

Comprehensive evaluation data have been collected from mentors and mentees from 2008 to 2012. Although the evaluation surveys have been slightly modified and improved from time to time, the data have been consistently positive.

Surveys include rating scales and mentees' responses that typically "strongly agree" or "agree" with items. For example, the data from semester 1, 2011 and 2012 mentees, as illustrated in Table 1, show that 65% of the 2,543 mentees who responded agreed or strongly agreed that their mentor provided them with useful information about Curtin. Similarly, 57% of respondents believed their mentor to always be available if they needed help or advice.

My Mentor. . .	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Unable to Judge
...provided me with useful information about Curtin.	21%	44%	5%	5%	25%
...helped me with study tips.	14%	33%	13%	8%	32%
...gave me confidence in beginning at Curtin	15%	38%	9%	6%	31%
...helped me feel I belong at Curtin.	14%	35%	10%	6%	36%
...was always available if I needed help or advice.	22%	35%	5%	6%	31%
...was approachable.	32%	38%	3%	5%	22%
...directed me to appropriate resources and services at Curtin.	21%	36%	7%	5%	31%

**Table 1: Mentee perception of mentors in semester 1, 2011 and 2012 (N=2, 543)**

A key goal of the mentor programme is to improve student retention, and to determine if the programme is achieving its goal, students are asked: "Were you at any point considering withdrawing from Curtin?" A follow-up question asked: "If Yes, did your mentor make any difference to your decision to continue at Curtin?" In 2012, Semester 1, 14% of students had considered withdrawing and, of those, 17% believed that their mentor assisted with their decision to stay at Curtin. These data are consistent with the same data obtained in previous years of the mentor programme. When extrapolated from this sample of mentees to the entire mentee group of 7,000, the data indicate that the mentor programme had a direct effect on the retention of approximately 166 students who had considered withdrawal in semester 1, 2012.

There is evidence that the programme is of benefit to mentors in various ways (Beltman and Schaeben, 2012). Surveys from 2009 to 2011 of 858 individual mentor responses were analysed and there were 1,285 separate benefits reported which could be grouped into four main categories. Most benefits were:

- *Altruistic* (47.2%), such as gaining enjoyment and satisfaction from assisting new students.
- *Cognitive* (17.8%), including learning about the university and developing communication and leadership skills.
- *Social* (14.7%), such as developing new friendships and networking with other mentors and staff.
- *Personal growth* (13.8%), where mentors reported developing confidence, empathy and pride.

Whilst the mentees were assisted in the beginning phase of their university life, this reciprocal intervention also benefited the senior students in the student mentor programme.

## Conclusion

Curtin University's mentor programme has delivered clear benefits to participating students who are involved as mentees and as mentors, and to the participating teaching areas and the university as a whole. Evaluation data clearly indicate that the model used contributes to improved student retention rates and enhanced quality of the student experience. The particular aspects of the Curtin model that are recommended include:

- It is desirable to construct an institution-wide mentor programme. In this way, core quality standards can be ensured by a central facilitating area while allowing the programme to be tailored to suit the demands of specific teaching areas.
- Initiating an institution-wide mentor programme in larger institutions is best done in stages over several years rather than all at once. In particular, the beginning stage should take place in teaching areas with a strong wish to participate. This approach develops "champions" of the programme amongst teaching staff and increasingly makes extending the programme into other areas easier.
- An "opt-out" model offers advantages over an "opt-in" model. If every new student is provided with a mentor rather than requesting one, there is a greater probability of offering support to students who may initially be unaware that they need it. In this context, it becomes especially important to link mentees to mentors as early as possible, preferably integrated within the orientation programme.

- Designers of mentor programmes are advised to give attention to the benefits that will accrue to mentors and participating teaching areas. Typically, the focus of mentor programme design has been on benefits to mentees, which is obviously desirable. However, the delivery of the programme is dependent on the participation of mentors and (in this model) on key academic staff.
  - In recruiting and supporting mentors, it is important to clearly communicate the gains they can expect from the programme.
  - For teaching staff, there are potentially altruistic and cognitive benefits similar to those gained by mentors. But teaching staff may be interested in more tangible benefits. It can be worth noting that staff frequently find that a mentor program reduces their workload, especially in dealing with repeated low grade requests for information from beginning students which are often easily handled by mentors. Formal ethics approval for the use of evaluation data was obtained prior to commencement of the programme, and some staff have taken advantage of this to present papers at conferences or publish in appropriate forums.
- Evaluation materials should be developed upon commencement of the programme. Some mentor programme facilitators delay this step until the program is operating; however developing evaluation processes upfront requires clear articulation of the goals of the programme. It also assists in mentor training if mentors are absolutely clear on programme goals and evaluation processes, because they are then able to modify their own behaviour accordingly. Evaluation should also ensure an effective feedback loop from all stakeholders to assist with regular review and improvement of the programme.

Mentor programmes such as Curtin's university-wide opt-out student peer mentor programme result in a triple-win in effective practice. New students, current students and staff all benefit. The return on investment of time and resources for all is highly worthwhile.

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## Engaging with students as partners at the University of Manchester

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### Keywords

- students as partners
- PASS
- peer mentoring
- consultation
- student experience
- student engagement

### Nature of intervention

Student engagement and partnership activities within the Students as Partners programme at the University of Manchester.

### Focus of intervention

The Students as Partners programme is academic and social in nature and is aimed at enhancing the student experience and improving practice.

### Description of intervention

Students as Partners (SaP) is a programme of work managed by the Teaching and Learning Support Office in liaison with the faculties and comprises the two main strands of Peer Support activity and Student Consultations. The programme supports and facilitates student-led activity, encouraging students to take a holistic approach to their learning and development, concentrating on enhancing the total student experience and recognising co-curricular learning opportunities as well as those available through the curriculum.

Peer Support activity involves two key elements: Peer-Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) and Peer Mentoring. Whilst Peer Mentoring is designed to help new students manage the environmental, social and cultural transition in adapting to university life, PASS is designed to help students manage key academic transition points, primarily during the first year of study but in some cases within the second year also, via weekly sessions facilitated by higher-year students. Student Consultations, meanwhile, bring together students from across the institution to gather their ideas and feedback on a wide variety of issues, ranging from the provision of key services to the design of new buildings.

Within the context of Peer Support, the SaP programme forms the bridge between students and the institution at a local level, both recognising the expertise that students have to offer and enabling them to see their contributions enacted in a meaningful way.

*“It’s all about getting students to engage with their faculties and degree programmes so they know that their input is what will make the course itself more than just what the lecturers can give.”* Rachael Feord, Life Sciences PASS Leader 2012–13

Such a function is of particular importance within the current climate of higher education. Whilst international students have historically paid higher fees, the rise in tuition fees for home and EU students has seen growing concerns as to the potential rise of a consumer identity in relation to those students entering university from September 2012. Much uncertainty remains as to how students’ expectations and demands may differ from those of their counterparts in previous years. This has direct implications when considering how to engage and partner with students during their time at university, with students now potentially more willing to voice their ideas and to take an increasingly active role in their learning.

## How the intervention engages students

There are three key areas which need to be considered when engaging students:

- 1 How do we form a meaningful partnership?
- 2 How do we value the partnership?
- 3 How do we sustain the partnership?

### How do we form a meaningful partnership?

In forming a meaningful partnership, one of the traditional ways of gaining the student perspective is via Unit surveys and the National Student Survey. These surveys are vital in influencing institutional changes but they usually inform such changes after the students have either finished a course or graduated. The aim of student partnership is to enable a meaningful ongoing discussion from when a student first enters the institution to beyond graduation. In view of this there need to be built into the student lifecycle supplementary ways of measuring experience so that students feel included and belong to the evolution of their institution from pre-arrival to graduation.

The three strands of the SaP programme aim to provide this supplementation. Firstly, it is imperative that the institution listens to the result of the NSS and Unit feedback but it must use this information to try to establish where there are significant gaps in the provision of services to students. It must then use this to engage students in helping them to build bridges of success over the perceived gaps in provision so that students do not have to make huge leaps across what might appear to be a great unknown. In building this bridge to success, it is important that the institution sources “communication champions” within both staff and faculties to connect with the student body. In making such a move it is also important that those “champions” are tasked with locating those who are also the “champions” from within the student body. Once these elements are brought together there can be both meaningful dialogue and strategic planning.

### How do we value the partnership?

Once meaningful dialogue and strategic planning are put in place through Peer Support schemes, it is imperative that the value of such commitments be highlighted. As part of the SaP programme, Leaders, Mentors and Staff Coordination teams are valued not just through the support provided, but also the opportunities offered. The programme constantly provides additional training opportunities to student volunteers so that they feel valued and belong to a wider Peer Support community. In receiving study skills training, careers sessions and ambassadorial opportunities, students recognise that they are valued in a holistic manner. To supplement these activities, students’ involvement is recognised on their HEAR with their achievements celebrated at the annual Students as Partners Presentation Evening. It is important that there exist public demonstrations of gratitude through the showcasing of best practice on the part of students and staff alike. The impact of these value-laden events and opportunities is that they help to keep students fully engaged and to see the wider impact that their partnership has on the institution. This sense of responsibility and value is also key in enabling students to contribute to student consultations; here they take their local enthusiasm and put it to work in a way that is beneficial across the institution. In valuing the partnership, the institution is further enriched because the reward culture adopted within the SaP programme creates students who want to take responsibility for the university of which they feel a keener sense of belonging and loyalty towards.

### How do we sustain the partnership?

In discussing the way in which the institution needs to value the partnership, it is likely that the structures alluded to in themselves create a sustaining effect. However, it is imperative that the institution measures the impact of programme activities and ensures that, once a thorough review has been undertaken, it works to implement a stable and secure partnership culture across the whole institution rather than simply leaving Peer Support mechanisms running solely in the hands of a few committed “champions”. Once the institution buys fully into the concept of partnership it will be able to plan successfully for a future in which partnering with students will be not just a novelty, but also an unquestionable ethos that ensures value, belonging and commitment are part of the fabric of student life.

## Link to the What Works? findings

When viewed in relation to the key findings of the report, the SaP programme appears to fit well within the What Works? model for improving student engagement and their sense of belonging. Students are encouraged to engage initially thanks to policies ensuring that Peer Support activities in particular are accessible. This is demonstrated by the significant efforts made to ensure PASS sessions are as well integrated as possible into timetables, for example, and by both PASS and Peer Mentoring schemes operating on an ‘opt-out’ basis from the very start.

However, as noted in the report itself, “students do not always recognise the value of engagement or have the skills to participate” (Thomas, 2012) and it is for this reason that SaP consistently strives to highlight the benefits of involvement to students in order to engage them in the first place. This is necessary not only on the level of the lower-year students at which schemes are directly aimed, but also for those students who act as PASS Leaders, Peer Mentors and Student Consultants and, indeed, the staff who support these processes.

Their efforts are explicitly recognised and valued through a variety of methods, both on a local and on a wider institutional level, through initiatives such as the aforementioned Presentation Evening. Such clear recognition serves to build and nurture a sense of belonging on the part of all involved, which in itself encourages students to become even more active and engaged within their schemes, their discipline areas and, via Student Consultations, with the University as an institution. In all, the SaP programme is strongly committed to building a community with which it is hoped as many students as possible will be able to engage and stands as an inspiring example of ways in which partnership can be successfully achieved.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

One clear indicator of the effectiveness of the programme in establishing a community of students, not forgetting staff, who demonstrate a sustained commitment to the programme, is the high level of involvement in Student Consultations by students already involved in Peer Support activities. A third of such students who took part in consultations during 2011–12 committed to attending three or more, whilst figures for the current year indicate that a fifth of students involved so far this year have already attended at least three consultations. This points toward a “snowball” effect that is present on an even wider scale throughout the programme: the more that students choose to involve themselves, initially through Peer Support schemes in the majority of cases, the more they recognise the benefits of doing so and thus are even more likely to take further opportunities in the future. Whilst it could be suggested that students engage only to the point necessary to reap the reward of being officially recognised as a Student Consultant, this is countered by the fact that a significant proportion of students, a third of those who committed to three or more consultations in 2011–12, continue to participate in additional consultations.

The full impact of the programme, however, is best demonstrated through the voices of the students who are themselves involved, whether through Peer Support, Student Consultations or, indeed, both.

*“I firmly believe that student consultations are a valuable tool for us and the university – little did I know at the time that I had stumbled upon something that would change the scope of my University life forever and in a uniquely positive way!”*

Meaghan Couture,

Peer Mentoring Student Co-ordinator 2012–13

Those students who engage most fully with the programme are quick to recognise the benefits that this brings to their personal development, while recognising the advantages their involvement extends to fellow students, staff and the wider university environment.

*“Throughout the year there were ongoing opportunities such as help with CVs, leadership training, study skills . . . There were lots of times where the university gave something back to me – it is not just a one-way street!”*

Abdul Ghalib Khan,

Maths PASS Student Co-ordinator 2012–13

*“The future of the university will be brighter if people get involved . . . they create synergy, an enthusiasm that enriches both parties!”*

Pietro Novelli,

Peer Mentoring Student Co-ordinator 2012–13

By consistently and explicitly valuing the hard work of those involved from within both the student and staff bodies the programme is able to continue to inspire enthusiasm and commitment on the part of everyone involved. As demonstrated through the quotations above, this shines through brightest of all in the cases of the students, who will carry with them the skills and insight that they develop through engagement with the programme throughout their time at university and beyond.

### **Conclusion**

In light of the work carried out by the SaP programme, several recommendations can be made. The identification of “champions” at each level and from within both student and staff bodies is crucial to the development and continuation of partnership activities and this must therefore be made a priority when seeking to establish such activities. Furthermore, such “champions” must receive recognition and appreciation of their work at both local and institutional levels so that they feel valued as contributors and also that the ethos of partnership activities becomes ingrained within the life of the institution itself. Finally, constant efforts must be made to further develop and extend partnership activities, with recognition that those at the very heart of the initiative, the students themselves, have the most important voices of all.

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### Website

<http://www.tlso.manchester.ac.uk/students-as-partners>

### Related publications, resources and further information

Carey, W. and Ody, M. (2009) Peer-assisted study sessions: Personalizing the learning experience, in D. Nutt and D. Calderon (eds) *International perspectives on the first-year experience in higher education* (monograph no. 52, 43–8). Columbia SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.



# The impact of a robust peer mentoring programme on student retention, success and satisfaction

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## Keywords

- peer mentoring
- higher education
- retention
- success.

## Nature of intervention

The Retention Mentoring scheme was piloted with the first-year Accounting and Finance Group (AFG) and Law School students at the University of Hertfordshire to aid retention and improve student satisfaction.

## Focus of intervention

The focus was on social integration and reducing attrition, although an element of academic support was anticipated.

## Description of intervention

Mentoring is indisputably beneficial within an educational setting, as asserted by Griffin (1995), Glaser *et al.* (2006), and Hill and Reddy (2007). However, Jacobi (1991) first identified that there is such a diverse range of definitions and models of mentoring as to make it difficult to determine success in quantifiable terms.

The Mentoring Unit, based at the University of Hertfordshire, has a proven 12-year history of successfully delivering and developing mentoring activities in order to raise aspirations and improve educational attainment. These include a Buddy Mentor scheme for International students, supporting disabled students, technology mentoring, and an alumni programme to aid the employability of final-year students. The Unit has recently been awarded accreditation by the National Mentoring and Befriending Foundation for delivering its programmes and training according to best practice.

Following the success of these other mentoring programmes, funding was granted from the University's HEIF4 (Higher Education Innovation Funding) and contributions from the Law School and the Accounting and Finance Group (AFG) (where retention rates had been identified as an area for improvement) to pilot a peer mentoring intervention. Twenty-three mentors were recruited using specific selection criteria and underwent the full two-day training programme. Selected students were from level 5 upwards or postgraduate students, the majority from the schools of Law and Business. References were obtained for each student and a full enhanced CRB check carried out prior to being matched with a mentee.

Mentoring toolkits were developed to assist the mentors with their mentoring sessions and additional materials were incorporated (with support from the Blended Learning Unit) that addressed specific issues such as for those undertaking re-sits and support to improve academic attainment. Mentoring handbooks, logbooks and guidelines were also issued to each mentor at the training, and feedback demonstrated that participants felt well prepared for the role.

Lecturers from Law and AFG were advised to identify "at risk" students early by recognising poor lecture attendance, poor quality or no coursework submission, or minimal/no contact with the tutor. Specific students were targeted when attending "consolidation classes" in order to prepare for re-sits and to all first-year Accounting and Finance students at their induction session. Emails were sent by lecturers to all the relevant first-year Law and AFG students inviting them to apply.

Interested students were given an FAQ sheet detailing the mentoring provision and then a one-to-one induction by a member of the mentoring team. This informed them of their responsibility in the relationship and the boundaries involved in the mentoring process. They were able to select from a range of mentor profiles a preference for who they would like to work with. The pilot study aimed to evidence the efficacy of a best practice peer mentoring programme in relation to student retention, satisfaction and success.

## How the intervention engages students

Mentors were consulted throughout the process and suggestions were welcomed and changes subsequently made to the publicity materials as a result of their input. Mentee recruitment for example was further enhanced by the mentors being proactive and using their discussion page and their own terminology to promote more interest and applications.

Mentors attended support workshops on a monthly basis as this was stated as being part of the mentoring commitment. This provided an opportunity for mentors to discuss any issues or difficulties arising from their mentoring relationships, exchanging ideas which in turn enabled them to further develop their skills. Contact sheets were also collected at the sessions, which allowed monitoring of the mentoring relationships. Additional support was provided by the Mentoring Co-ordinator via email or telephone in between the support workshops.

A secure e-mentoring system was used to monitor the frequency and quality of the mentoring relationships. The Mentoring Co-ordinator is routinely alerted in the event of no contact being made between mentor and mentee, which can then be followed up.

All participants were requested to use this e-mentoring system, enabling the evaluation to be carried out. Although much of the contact between the pairs was carried out face to face, many also used text messaging and/or Skype. A sampling of the email exchanges shows that in many cases the support given by the mentor to their mentee had more of an academic focus rather than social integration, as can be seen from the samples below:

### Example 1

*"I have had a look at the coursework – I am sure it's something you will be able to complete really well.*

*"The main aim of this paper is to provide advice so ensure the essay is providing the reader (in this case the ski company) lots of advice and useful tips that relate to their particular situation throughout the essay. The advice they ask for is regarding 'formulating the required rate of return' in an appropriate manner suitable for the new investments: new ski slope and ski wear. Make sure the advice you provide is tailored to these particular investments."*

### Example 2

*"Hi, It was really nice to meet you, I hope you found it useful. The book that I recommended for you, to help with your assignments, is called Writing For Law, by Dave Powell and Emma Teare. The secure link to access studynet when you are researching from home is: <web site address>."*

Mentors were closely monitored to ensure that the support given was within the boundaries of the mentoring relationship and that access was not given to their own assignments.

## Link to the What Works? findings

Projects 2 and 5 of the What Works study carried out by Andrews *et al.* (2011) and Husband *et al.* (2009) conclude that it is essential for any mentoring programme to adhere to best practice guidelines. This pilot was delivered as such, having fully screened and trained mentors, through careful programme monitoring and mentor supervision, and was facilitated by a dedicated team of professionals.

This pilot hoped to build upon the What Works findings by focusing more on the mentee perspective of the relationship as opposed to the mentor. It was reported that the mentors had enjoyed their role and felt that they had made a positive contribution to their mentee. It revealed that 84% of mentees wanted to become a mentor and the majority would recommend having one but did not focus on what the specific aspects of the benefits were.

There was also a suggestion of an association between Peer Mentoring and lower attrition rates which this pilot scheme aimed to evidence further.

## Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Prior to being matched with a mentor, every mentee completed a mentee profile form that not only helped with the matching process, but also provided baseline data. This enabled both quantitative and qualitative data to be collected and the "distance travelled" to be recorded with such issues as confidence in their academic performance and student satisfaction.

Of the total 29 mentees who took part, 22 completed a post-mentoring evaluation. To summarise, there was, from pre- to post-mentoring:

- an 18% increase overall in their satisfaction with their academic performance;
- a 16% increase in their confidence in their ability to obtain their degree;
- a 12% increase with their general contentment with being a University of Hertfordshire student.

Mentees reported that the majority of the support they received from their mentor was with academic issues such as revisions skills, organisational skills, coursework, presentation skills and work placements, and with balancing their work/study. Nine students stated that they were supported with “fitting in to university”. These results cannot, of course, all be attributed to the mentoring. Other factors including the passage of time alone may have contributed to these positive results. The qualitative data provided by the mentees, however, indicates that the mentors had potentially contributed to these successes in areas such as achieving better grades and improved time management skills.

Ratings were also collected from mentees (on a scale of 1 to 10), awarding the help received from their mentor on specific issues such as integrating/fitting in, work placements and academic skills (such as giving presentations and time management). The average scores awarded for support given overall were high, between 7 and 8. The feedback also demonstrated quite clearly that the main areas for support given were with revision, organisational skills, coursework and balancing work/study.

The exam results of 20 students who were mentored showed that 16 passed all their modules in the range of mid-50s to 70s. One mentee failed all modules and three failed between one and four of their modules. The mentees who had failed some or all of the modules had had less successful mentoring relationships, that is, they had not communicated with their mentor very frequently. This concurs with previous findings showing a correlation between engagement with the programme and success, National Mentoring Partnership (2005) “less effective mentors do not meet regularly with the mentee”.

Bearing in mind that the participating students had initially been identified as “at risk” of failing, these results can be considered successful. Another benefit of the programme can be demonstrated by the interest of mentees in becoming mentors. Sixteen indicated that they would apply (or had already done so) and all but one of the mentees who responded would recommend the scheme to other students. None of the mentees who took part dropped out of university.

The majority were satisfied with the support received but when asked what could be improved, some suggested starting it earlier and having more than one meeting a week. Other positive comments include:

*“There are not any improvements that can be made.”*

*“More awareness needed, because I only spotted it in semester B, and would have been useful if I knew about it at the start of the year.”*

*“It will enhance skills in areas where you might not be comfortable with.”*

*“My mentor motivated me.”*

*“Recommend it to any first year – by January at the latest.”*

*“I am very happy that I have got a mentor and [with] the support that was given, as it is the best.”*

## **Conclusion**

Mentor feedback concurs with that of the mentees in that they have supported with mainly academic issues, a minority assisting with friendship and housing issues. They report seeing an improvement in the confidence of their mentee/s and a better understanding of what is required of them academically. Some had supported their mentee in applying for work/placements.

*“For someone who felt that she was not good enough to be a barrister or solicitor, she has now decided that she wants to go down the route of a solicitor and has been looking for a vacation scheme. She is really applying herself and she has, what seems to me, more self-esteem than when we started when she felt she was not good enough due to her friend talking down to her.”*

*“I have learnt to really and truly appreciate each individual and their academic habits. Also I have learned to manage my time better and have more than one responsibility at a time.”*

It is apparent that mentoring was a beneficial experience for not only the mentors who themselves reported enhanced communication skills and confidence levels – the majority (who were not in their final year and leaving) wanting to volunteer again for next year – but also the mentees.

Academic improvement was not initially a particular focus of this pilot although there is qualitative evidence to suggest that this may also have resulted from the mentoring relationships. A further quantitative study is being conducted on a larger scale to determine whether the support of a peer mentor can also improve academic attainment.

It is essential that any increase in participant numbers does not have a detrimental effect on the quality of the mentoring provision in terms of mentor supervision, training and resources. Financially this scheme can be considered a cost-effective practice for higher education institutions as the retention of just a few students would counteract the cost of delivery.

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## Website

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## Section 4: Participation and belonging

Section 4 comprises of six papers, each one promoting student participation and belonging through the development of relationships and the creation of a community. The first paper in this section, submitted by Carol Pearson at the University of Westminster, provides an overview of an academic intervention where personal tutoring sessions have been integrated into a first year module in the Psychology department.

The second paper, by Lorraine Weaver and Debbie Holmes at the University of Worcester, describes another approach, which is embedded in the Personal Development Planning scheme in the Institute of Science and the Environment. The next intervention is an activity-led learning approach situated within the Engineering, Computing and Mathematics department at Coventry University. Sarah Wilson-Medhurst discusses the challenges of activity-led learning during the first seven weeks of the course. Byron *et al.* provide insight into a three-day outdoor-pursuits and team-building event held at the Division of Midwifery, School of Health in the University of Central Lancashire.

Following this, Richard Keegan of the University of Lincoln discusses the use of Twitter as an academic and social intervention in the School of Sport and Exercise Science; whilst the final paper in this section, by Candy Ho of Simon Fraser University in Canada, introduces a volunteer recruitment scheme.

# Student retention and success: The importance of personal tutoring for the transitional experiences of first year undergraduates in higher education

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## Keywords

- personal tutoring
- first year experience
- retention
- success

## Nature of intervention

First year personal tutoring developed in Psychology at the University of Westminster to enhance student experience, facilitating greater accessibility and development of relationships between students and their tutors.

## Focus of intervention

This is an academic intervention aimed at enhancing student experience as well as informing practice to improve first-year student experience, retention and success.

## Description of intervention

As part of a review of the tutoring system, research was undertaken over a three-year period (2003–2006), using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The research clearly indicated the importance of understanding the first year student experience and underlined the importance of institutional commitment to giving support and guidance. The results informed policy change across the university.

Pearson *et al.* (2008) looked at first-year Psychology undergraduates' experience of the transition into higher education. Our aim was to *give students a voice* through which we would be able to gain an insight into their transitional experiences into higher education. Results of our qualitative study indicated that students make four difficult transitional moves in the adjustment process:

- a move from directed to self-directed learning;
- a move from being controlled to self-control;
- a move from familiarity to anonymity; and
- a move from teaching-led tutorial contact to student-led tutorial contact.

Students reported having developed a *lack of motivation* to attend which was fuelled by feelings of isolation and demoralisation. Generally, some of this type of pressure was felt by all the students. Some had expectations prior to starting their degree that this might be the case, but the reality often exceeded their expectations of potential difficulties. In turn this drop in motivation had led some of the students to thoughts of "*dropping out*". The main suggestions arising from the study were to provide greater support at the beginning of the degree course, and a clear operational definition of the personal tutoring system.

Hixenbaugh *et al.* (2006) looked at student perspectives on personal tutoring, asking "what do students want?" Our findings suggested that our personal tutoring system was working well in parts; there was evidence of good practice that was appreciated by students. On the whole, students *wanted* to see their personal tutor more than they *needed* to see them; students may gain a sense of support from the knowledge that they can approach their tutor regardless of whether or not they need to. However, students appeared to have a lack of confidence in their ability to cope with the demands of university life. Some had thought about withdrawing from the course but their main source of support and advice was from their social network. Worryingly, 26% reported not discussing their feelings about withdrawing with anyone. Students reported wanting a more structured and active personal tutoring system, which provided regular and frequent meetings so that they could gain feedback about their general progress. Personal tutors should take an active role throughout the course of their degree, be accessible, approachable, reliable, enthusiastic, and relate and care about them both as students and as people. We concluded that the personal tutoring system in operation at the time was *reactive*, in other words, it was fairly successful in meeting the

needs that students brought to us, however we felt that we needed to move to a more *proactive* system, thus preventing problems before they develop.

Many new initiatives were developed across the university; the overarching emphasis of these initiatives was on first-year students' transitional experience. One such initiative was in the Department of Psychology where a new Tutoring Policy was implemented in 2006. As part of this process only full-time and fractional staff, that is, staff who were easily accessible, would be personal tutors; personal tutoring would be linked to a first-year core, year-long psychology module, Research Methods. Students, as part of this module, would have a two-hour practical session each week that would be led by their personal tutor. Hence, students would have structured contact time, support, and guidance with their personal tutor each week throughout their first year. The department also introduced another level of support for students, the role of Level Co-ordinators. The rationale was that, as well as additional support for students, Level Co-ordinators would facilitate a more integrated approach between tutors and senior staff such as the Head of Department, Course Leaders and a Senior Tutor. Co-ordinators were introduced at first-, second- and third-year levels; they would provide students with an additional two hours of dedicated contact office hours per week, make regular email contact, and make regular announcements through Blackboard so as to provide important university, course and module information. Attendance monitoring was also introduced, for example first-year personal tutors monitored attendance during the practical sessions on the Research Methods module; students absent for three consecutive weeks would be contacted by the Level Co-ordinator and offered additional support and guidance.

### **How the intervention engages students**

The aim was to develop a co-ordinated and proactive approach to tutoring, providing students with a strong support network, within their learning and teaching environment, during their first year of study. Relationships between staff and students play an important part in the successful negotiation of the transition into higher education; however we know that students are often reluctant to bring their problems to their personal tutor (Hixenbaugh *et al.*, 2006). Having set regular contact with personal tutors allows students and tutors to engage on a regular basis, allowing the development of reciprocal relationships between the two; contact was provided by integrating personal tutoring into a core first-year module, which runs throughout the academic year thus allowing students to have interaction with their tutor on a weekly basis. This group tutoring approach allowed the development of a greater sense of belonging and group identity, students being encouraged to work together and support each other; from the tutors' perspective this raised their awareness of students' concerns. Students were also given the opportunity to see their personal tutor and the Level Co-ordinator, on an individual basis, during designated "office hours" each week.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

This work addresses ways to improve student retention and success, issues which are consistent with the conceptual model of the "What Works" programme. Effective personal tutoring is a recognised intervention which plays an important part in students' transitional experience into higher education. Our research findings, as part of a larger review of personal tutoring across the university, led to strategic change at departmental level and led to a number of initiatives across the university. We were able to adapt our personal tutoring strategy, giving emphasis to the first year student experience. This has led to greater student engagement with their personal tutors and improvements in student retention across the university.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

Development of the personal tutoring system, with particular emphasis on the first year student experience, was one of several initiatives implemented across the university with a view to improving student retention. Over the four successive academic years, after the review and implementation of changes to the personal tutoring system, monitoring data indicates that the Psychology Department has seen a steady improvement in progression rates at level 4: from 2007–2011 there has been an overall increase of 7%. At university level we have also seen an overall improvement in level 4 progression rates: from 2007–2011 there has been an overall increase of 8%.

The final evaluation of the revised personal tutoring system, however, is expressed in the words of some of our Psychology final-year students who participated in a series of focus groups in 2011. Overall, students were very positive about the personal tutoring system:

- students felt they had had enough support when they needed it;
- important to students was that staff were approachable, helpful, and willing to engage in conversation.

However, some students had a very narrow view of personal tutoring, seeing it more in terms of receiving academic rather than personal support; for example when asked what they had seen their personal tutor about, some indicated that they had only seen them to get help making their module choices.

Some said that they "*didn't think of getting personal advice*", or they "*didn't need it*", or that they "*knew who to go to but didn't need help*".

Others said that although they did use tutors to help make their module choices, they also found the tutors helpful and supportive in other ways:

*“At first I didn’t feel comfortable going to her [personal tutor] in that way but once I realised that I could go to her about my personal things . . . I got a lot of help . . . helped me through my first semester . . . that’s why I’m still here I think.”*

Interestingly there was an appreciation that contact with tutors should be *student* rather than *tutor led*, suggesting “*that this was how it should be*”, linking this to the development of independence, which although daunting was supported by staff. “*If I asked staff would always help and give good advice*”:

*“Before starting I had high expectations . . . these somewhat dropped when I first started in the first year . . . I became less motivated, scared “independence” aspect . . . this is it, I’m by myself . . . but had good conversations with my tutor . . . she really helped – spent the whole of her office hours helping me once.”*

*“First semester particularly difficult, second semester slightly better – think you know it all before you get here . . . when I saw my tutor I did get good advice.”*

Students emphasised that in their first year, seeing tutors every week had been important to them:

*“Personal tutor really helped . . . saw him every week . . . never thought I’d be considering post-grad or PhD . . . I’ve really developed since my first year.”*

## Conclusion

It is clear from the evaluative measures above that student retention and success is positively affected by the implementation of effective personal tutoring systems. However, there are lessons to be learned which could influence practice in higher education institutions, policy makers, and who those who prioritise the student perspective on personal tutoring.

### Lessons learned

#### Accessibility

This has to be addressed both on a practical level and on a personal level.

On a practical level there is a need to provide a system which gives regular and frequent accessibility to personal tutors especially during students’ first year at university. Students are often reluctant to see their personal tutor, despite having feelings of isolation, demoralisation, and being overwhelmed. Although it is often difficult to allocate staff time because of limited resources, personal tutoring can be implemented in a way which gives regular set contact by incorporating this into the modular programme; staff time is then efficiently utilised and students benefit from knowing they can see their tutor each week. This should be supplemented by other forms of accessibility such as office hours, email or by phone.

On a personal level, tutors need to be approachable, for example be caring, helpful, understanding and able to relate to students’ experiences. Personal tutors are often seen as *busy people*, and sometimes their *general manner* and *tone of voice* mean that students are reluctant to bother them. Personal tutors need to be people who are seen as personally accessible.

#### Type of support

Students need to be aware of the types of tutor support available. Despite the fact that personal tutoring policies are usually made available and accessible to students, quite often, with the other overriding demands of their degree, students fail to recognise what support can be sought.

Academic support is often well taken up by students; advice from personal tutors is often sought on *university processes* such as module enquiries, plagiarism, and student fees, or *course-related issues* in terms of referrals to appropriate material, websites and other staff.

However, personal support is commonly not considered as part of the role of personal tutors by many students, or some simply feel unable to consult their tutor on personal matters. As suggested above, tutor approachability is important.

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# Embedding mandatory personal tutorials within a personal development planning scheme to improve student retention and success

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## Keywords

- personal development planning
- tutorials
- biological sciences

## Nature of intervention

Mandatory personal tutorials were embedded within a personal development planning (PDP) scheme to improve student retention and success within the Institute of Science and the Environment at the University of Worcester.

## Focus of intervention

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

## Description of intervention

The Biological Sciences tutors at the University of Worcester have developed a personal development planning scheme based on QAA (Quality Assurance Agency) Biosciences graduate and transferable skills. It contains a number of elements which run from induction through to a capstone module at level 6 and is compulsory for all Biological Sciences students. It was developed with three main aims in mind:

- to help students to reflect on the skills they need in order to attain the next step in their studies;
- to make more effective use of the opportunities provided by personal tutorials to give the necessary individual support and guidance;
- to increase students' employability.

The PDP scheme is very structured and runs throughout the three years with many strands, but an important aspect in terms of retention and achievement is that it makes effective use of the opportunities provided by personal tutorials by making them mandatory. In all degrees within the Biological Sciences, all students take certain mandatory modules and so the scheme was linked to suitable modules within each year by adding a learning outcome of 'engagement with the Biological Sciences PDP scheme'. An assessment item of 'attendance at two personal tutorials this semester' was then added and failure to attend results in failure of that module.

The tutorials are structured to enable the students to develop throughout the course and include examining the written feedback given on their assessments in order to detect any patterns and to plan the next step towards improvement. Discussion of the students' current skills and attributes and reflection on their progress is also included, as is reviewing their PDP portfolios in which they keep, for example, evidence that they have had the opportunity to develop specific practical skills. It is intended that this portfolio will form the basis of the Biological Sciences Higher Education Achievement Report. The tutorials also link into a tightly organised route for the preparation of a dissertation at level 6.

Following the results of a separate piece of pedagogic research, many of the "information giving" and study skills sessions have been removed from induction week and have been replaced by social activities so the students can start to build relationships with each other and the staff, particularly their personal tutors. An assessment of the students' learning preferences, as well as group tutorials, also takes place during this early stage.

During the past two years, the personal tutors have also received the results of fortnightly multiple choice tests given in two mandatory level 4 modules, so giving them extra information about their tutees' progress and, to some extent, attitude to work. This has been particularly valuable in the first semester when there is little other evidence available.

## **How the intervention engages students**

Before the introduction of our PDP scheme, students rarely attended personal tutorials and usually only if they had a problem. These problems were frequently of the sort which the tutors could do nothing about except direct the student to the appropriate support services. Students who left the courses because of personal problems usually did so without consulting their tutor first.

Ensuring that students see their personal tutors regularly and on a one-to-one basis allows the tutor to give a great deal of individual support, advice and guidance and at the time when it will be of most benefit.

The students are made aware of the general topics which will be covered in each tutorial throughout their three years with us and can see how these link to their personal and academic development. They are aware that their personal tutors are monitoring their progress and giving them tailored, individual assistance in order to maximise their chances of success.

## **Link to the What Works? findings**

Our personal development planning scheme has clear links to both the academic and the social engagement shown to be so important in student retention. Induction week activities provide the students with early opportunities for social interaction with each other and the staff, so enhancing their sense of belonging as well as providing the staff with useful information about their learning preferences, career choices and aspirations.

The students can no longer avoid personal tutorials, which provide tutors with the opportunities to give the support and advice needed by each individual student, at that particular time, in order to maximise their success. This regular contact with a member of academic staff to discuss and encourage progress encompasses three of the four main approaches to nurturing belonging identified by the findings of the "What Works?" project.

The structured nature of the tutorials facilitates the students' development throughout the course, encouraging them to become independent, active learners. The tutors can monitor the students' progress on a regular basis and ensure that the students make the best use of the feedback that they are given. They can guide the construction and implementation of a plan for personal development, both in the short term (the next step to take in order to improve) and in the longer term (what skills are needed for a particular career pathway, for example, and how can these be developed). This shows each student their clear pathway and gives them ownership of their development.

## **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

The PDP scheme was started in September 2007 and so data on student non-completions and awards from the three years before its introduction (the earliest available data was for the 2004–05 cohort) and the five years since has been analysed in order to judge the effectiveness of the PDP scheme in terms of retention and success. Data from all the courses within the Biological Sciences programme were used.

The student non-completion rate had been increasing from 8.82% in 2004–05 to peak in 2006–07 at 21.87% (mean value for the three years is 16.38%). In the first year of the PDP scheme, this fell to 16.67% but continued to fall in the following four years and is now at 4.37%. This figure represents the total non-completion rate for all three year groups, not just level 4. The final awards also rose, from a mean of 49.97% of third year students achieving a First or 2:1 to 73.66% for those students who had experienced the PDP scheme from their first year.

Such data obviously has to be interpreted with caution as several other changes were occurring within the institute and the university during this time, including a very large and rapid increase in the number of students taking the Biological Sciences courses. Our student numbers increased nearly threefold within this period. However, several staff have reported how the regular, individual tutorials have allowed difficulties to be discovered which, without staff intervention, would probably have resulted in those students leaving the university.

In the first two years, following the introduction of compulsory tutorials, two or three students (but surprisingly few) managed to slip through the net. When students missed a tutorial they therefore failed the module to which the scheme was linked, so a reassessment opportunity had to be offered. Retaking a missed tutorial at the end of the academic year did not seem to be a sensible option in view of the structured nature of the PDP scheme and so an essay on the 'advantages and disadvantages of the Biological Sciences PDP scheme' was given instead, which seemed to help focus the students' attention on one very clear advantage of not missing any tutorials. However, the problem disappeared as the tutors became more familiar with the system and when all students had experienced the scheme from their first year.

At first the mandatory personal tutorial system, with students failing a module if they did not attend, was seen across the university as harsh. However, the beneficial effects have been recognised and, from September 2011, a system of two mandatory personal tutorials each semester, linked to modules, was adopted across the entire university.

## Conclusion

The previous personal tutorial system had many potential benefits but the students rarely took advantage of these. By using a simple process to make attendance at tutorials mandatory, and by linking them to a structured PDP scheme, all students now receive frequent, individual support and advice. Since the PDP scheme is designed to enable tutors to provide appropriate guidance at each stage of the students' development, it is valuable throughout their time at university. Furthermore, it seems likely that the scheme encourages a sense of belonging which improves retention rates.

## Related publications, resources and further information

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# Enabling belonging and engagement through activity-led learning

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## Keywords

- activity-led learning (ALL)
- student belonging
- social and academic engagement
- collaborative learning
- meaningful challenge.

## Nature of intervention

The intervention enables social and academic engagement and student belonging through activity-led learning for first-year undergraduate students. The intervention has experience enhancement activities in Engineering, Computing and Mathematics at Coventry University.

## Focus of intervention

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

## Description of intervention

The practice summarised here is a holistic approach to curriculum design and delivery based on the activity-led learning (ALL) pedagogy. ALL is an approach to education in which the motivation for learning is provided by stimulating activity that engages and enthuses students and creates challenge, relevance, integration, professional awareness and variety (Wilson-Medhurst *et al.*, 2008; Wilson-Medhurst, 2010). In the first year, where this practice example is focussed, ALL operates as a transition pedagogy supporting early social and academic engagement and enhancing students' sense of belonging.

On entry to their programmes of study, all Engineering, Computing and Mathematics first year undergraduates in the Faculty of Engineering and Computing (EC) at Coventry University take part in an extended induction and orientation phase, typically of seven weeks' duration (induction plus six weeks), that engages students in meaningful activity-led learning challenges. In some instances, after a two- or three-week induction and initial orienting activity phase, the first-year ALL experience operates in a "long thin" model with an integrating activity operating over the whole of the first term or year, typically on a day-a-week basis.

These challenges are located within the course (programme) discipline and involve students in teamwork. Each student team is also supported by a personal tutor who is also available for individual support. The personal tutor promotes reflection and learning from the ALL learning experiences and gives students the opportunity to discuss difficulties and challenges with this 'active' mode of learning and studying which may be new to some students including, but not limited to, European and international students.

Students experience further ALL challenges throughout their studies with this early orientation experience framing and supporting these later experiences. Two examples of these "transition" (first) year forms of activity-led learning are now given to illustrate the key features of the first-year ALL approach.

In Computing, in their first six weeks, undergraduate students undertake a set of week-long tasks that build into a single project. For example, they may be asked to develop an MP3 player. This requires them to produce: the appropriate software; a physical interface; a usability evaluation; viral marketing materials; and an academic paper on their work. At the end of each week students give a presentation to tutors and peers on that week's experience as well as a final presentation on the whole experience. By focusing on solving immediate problems, students' learning is active, targeted and lasting. Group work facilitates shared learning as students exchange knowledge and skills. Using tools for recording information and regular forums for presentation and dissemination develops students' social and communicative literacy. The ultimate outcome of this approach is the observable enhancement of students' integrative and critical thinking as reflected in their approach to future design and development tasks.

In Civil Engineering and various building-related undergraduate courses, year one students start realistic group project work in the first weeks of their course following some initial team-building activities. In recent years, topics have included a footbridge in a park and a cycleway connecting tourist attractions. This integrative project is revisited later in the year for an intensive one-week activity culminating in presentations to an audience of local employers. This is an example of the kind of integrated project work that runs through the civil engineering and building courses, developing students' capacity to work in multidisciplinary teams and demonstrating transversal competences such as adaptability and communication.

The above two examples serve to illustrate key implementation features of the first-year undergraduate ALL activities:

- Motivating, meaningful challenges that require team-work and collaboration for successful completion.
- Providing the space (physically and mentally) to have some fun and engage in some form of practical hands-on activity in recognition of the pragmatic learning philosophy that underpins activity-led learning and its focus on forming productive "habits of action" (Dewey, 1921).
- Being firmly located within the discipline but exposing students to the range of knowledge and skills they will require to operate effectively as a professional, including the transversal skills they will require.
- Incorporating elements of friendly (low-stakes) competition to motivate and promote peer-to-peer learning.
- Formative feedback (often "quick and dirty") as well as the opportunity to feed learning forward into later summative assessments.
- A team-based approach to teaching delivery, and an emphasis on enabling students to get to know the learning environment and facilities including laboratory and/or specialist computing laboratory facilities and the technicians and other support staff. This helps students' sense of belonging and feeling part of a learning community.
- First-year activities are explicitly chosen to act as a form of anchor or "place-holder", that is, they introduce concepts, knowledge and skills, for example aspects of metrology (measurement) and design, as well as transversal skills, that will be revisited and developed during their course in meaningful contexts.

### **How the intervention engages students**

To promote social engagement, the early ALL team-based challenges are "low-stakes" in terms of assessment, that is, the emphasis is on formative feedback and friendly competition to encourage collaborative learning and the opportunity to get to know the learning environment and make friends. In these early stages team members, typically four to six per team, are drawn from the same course to support the development of course identity and the social experience. The link to the personal tutor system also facilitates social engagement and belonging.

Academic engagement is supported through the activity design and challenge. For example, in Mechanical and Automotive Engineering the six activities over the first six weeks of the first-year programme deliberately expose students to different facets of engineering practice and study: design and build; metrology; CAD (computer-aided design) modelling; materials testing; and product marketing. The six-week experience also employs, for example, active learning, high levels of student-staff contact and prompt feedback, to make the activity "high impact" (Kuh, 2008) and promote ongoing academic engagement. Wilson-Medhurst and Green (2012) present an example of a "high-impact" design from the Mechanical and Automotive engineering six-week experience, which relies on a team-based approach.

### **Links to the What Works? findings**

The ALL interventions are initiated right at the start of the student lifecycle, promoting an early sense of belonging at the start of the course. In the What Works? report, early (and ongoing) engagement is identified as an important factor in promoting student retention and success.

The ALL interventions are firmly located in the academic sphere, that is, they are part of the mainstream learning and teaching practice of the faculty. The "What Works?" report identifies the academic sphere as being of primary importance to ensure all students benefit from new practices.

The ALL interventions are monitored and reviewed through a participatory action research model where the student feedback gathered via an ALL-aligned survey instrument (Wilson-Medhurst, 2010) is used by staff to identify where further refinements and improvements can be made. Course-based student forums are also regularly convened (termly) to provide further student feedback opportunities and students are also employed in part-time advocate roles (students supporting students) where they arrange ALL enrichment activities such as off-site visits to conventions, research events and others. All these activities develop the capacity of staff and students to engage as recommended by the "What Works?" report.

Institutional management and co-ordination is also firmly in place with the ALL pedagogy "centre-stage" in the faculty's vision: to build communities of learners engaged in employer- and profession-focused activity-led education. This institutional management and co-ordination is also witnessed by the £55 million investment in new learning (building) facilities, completed in August 2012, designed to support and enable activity-led learning in the Engineering, Computing and Mathematics disciplines.

## Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Every year since the ALL interventions started on all undergraduate programmes in EC (2009–10), students have been surveyed with the above-mentioned ALL-aligned survey instrument, based on indicators of engaged learning (Wilson-Medhurst, 2010). This survey provides students with an opportunity to respond to (Likert scale) satisfaction items as well as open-ended questions. The survey is first run at the end of the first ALL experience they encounter, that is, part way through their first year. The results below relate to this survey point.

Student responses to the open-ended question inviting them to identify what they liked about the ALL experience frequently identify the “opportunity to make friends/work in a team” as a benefit of the ALL experience. This suggests social engagement and belonging are promoted by the ALL experience. This is further supported by student responses to Question 7, “I feel part of a learning community where I can learn from others”, which is presented in Table 1.

Course (identified by letter code)	Number of respondents	Approx. cohort (course) size	Response rate (%)	Question 7 mean agreement (/5)
L	56	70	80	4.29
F	23	48	48	4.25
K	100	120	83	4.20
G	63	80	79	3.90
C	79	95	83	3.75
D	79	115	69	3.72
E	38	55	69	3.70
I	114	150	76	3.69
J	113	150	75	3.65
H	58	80	73	3.54
B	49	90	54	3.53
A	114	155	74	3.48
				Mean = 3.81 Stdev = 0.29
N =	886	1208	73%	

**Table 1: 2010–11 cohort data sets ordered by Question 7 (‘I feel part of a learning community where I can learn from others’) mean agreement scores**

These responses demonstrate that the majority of students do feel part of a learning community where they can learn from others. This suggests the ALL experience is promoting social engagement and a sense of belonging. When this feedback is combined with the above-mentioned qualitative feedback and staff observations, this claim is further strengthened. However a small proportion of students (typically varying between 10% and 15%) do not experience the same sense of belonging, suggesting they may need further support to gain such a sense of belonging (or they may prefer other modes of engagement). The above data also suggests some ALL experiences are better than others at promoting social engagement and belonging. A key factor seems to be the extent to which friendly low-stakes competition and peer-to-peer informal learning is promoted by the ALL activity and experience design.

This questionnaire-based approach to evaluating the ALL implementations gives all undergraduate students the opportunity to feed back if they wish to. The open questions enable students to give further information on the things they particularly liked or gained from the experience as well as on where improvements could be made or what they didn’t like. As a core set of questions is asked each year, this allows the ALL implementations to be monitored over time and the impact of changes to be evaluated using key indicators (questions) such as Question 7 above.

For example, in 2010–11, student feedback gathered via the questionnaire flagged that the “learning community”/sense of belonging indicator had degraded in specific cohorts. For some cohorts this was linked to an increase in cohort sizes and as a result the implementation design was not operating as effectively in enabling students to feel part of a learning community. This is illustrated above where courses I, J and A had significant increases in numbers, as did K, but course K’s strategies seemed to be more effective in maintaining students’ sense of belonging to a learning community as reflected in their Question 7 mean agreement score. This highlighted that courses I, J and A needed to adjust their ALL activity design and staff and peer support structures to accommodate the increase in student numbers, which they did.

However, the questionnaire approach to evaluation, while sustainable (given the availability of an independent researcher), doesn’t allow richer, more detailed feedback on the actual lived experience of the ALL implementations that techniques such as interviews or focus groups give. Focus groups have been employed in the first year of implementation and subsequently with specific groups, for example final-year students, looking back at their ALL experiences on the course. This research has

helped to further illuminate “what works” including how the practical hands-on elements are a key motivator and enabler of learning, including the affective dimensions of learning such as confidence-building.

## Conclusion

The first-year activity-led learning interventions described in this case study are driven by clear pedagogical principles that inform both the intervention design (an activity with a significant co-creative, often hands-on practical element) as well as the delivery approach (team-based) and learning environment (learning spaces and facilities selected to promote collaborative learning).

This practice is innovative in its sustained use of “high impact” early-stage first-year undergraduate experiences across all undergraduate programmes, that is enabled by an aligned pedagogy and use of learning spaces as well as curriculum design and assessment practices. For others looking to implement similar practices, or enhance their existing practice, a key lesson learnt from the implementations at Coventry University is the importance of ongoing evaluation using aligned indicators. Such evaluation allows the monitoring of the ALL implementations and the ability to make timely adjustments, if not immediately, then for the next cycle of implementation, to try and ensure desired goals are achieved. Such aligned evaluation also allows Coventry University to identify where there are students (and what proportion) who don’t perceive they are gaining the same social and academic engagement benefits/sense of belonging as their peers and what the barriers to their engagement might be.

Peer mentoring, often initiated by students themselves, is one way in which Coventry University is working with students to tackle this issue of social and academic (dis)engagement that we know is still a problem for some students. Coventry is also aware that educators have to allow students to engage in ways that they feel suit them (Krause, 2005) and provide flexibility, without degrading the benefits to be had from the collaborative and informal learning that ALL promotes.

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# Team-building in Tyn Dwr: Enhancing the learning experience through collaborative working

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## Keywords

- team-building
- retention
- reflection
- self-awareness
- belonging
- collaboration

## Nature of intervention

Student team-building and collaborative practice experience, with Frontier, Tyn Dwr, in the Division of Midwifery, Neonatal and Sexual Health, School of Health at the University of Central Lancashire.

## Focus of intervention

The intervention is a blend of academic, professional and social experiences aimed at enhancing the student experience by promoting involvement and sense of belonging in order to improve academic attainment, practice and retention.

## Description of intervention

The Division of Midwifery, Neonatal and Sexual Health within the School of Health at the University of Central Lancashire offers all first-year undergraduate students the opportunity, within their course, to attend a three-day outdoor-pursuits and team-building event. The three-day course takes place at one of the university's campuses in Tyn Dwr, Wales. It is developed and delivered by the lecturing staff from the students' degree programme and specialist outdoors activity and team-building consultants Frontier Education.

The three days are usually planned to take place within the first two weeks of the start of the course so that students are given the opportunity to establish friendships with their peers very early on in their course.

The focus of the intervention is to offer the students and lecturers the opportunity to learn about how others and, more importantly, how they themselves contribute to team dynamics and activity. In addition, the students learn the art of reflection and how it may be used to overcome challenges and build upon strengths. Lecturers and students work closely together, throughout the three days, which enables invaluable relationship formation that can be carried forward into the entire programme of education.

The students and lecturers travel together by coach and engage in the activities as soon as they arrive at Tyn Dwr. These are designed to stimulate learning, self-awareness and reflection, first with ice-breaking exercises, moving on to trust-building activities. The second day focuses on team-building and group exercises, including problem-solving games to promote team work and collaboration. Throughout each day of activity the students are provided with regular opportunities to reflect personally or within a group. The third day incorporates tasks aimed at pushing own boundaries and challenging individual fears (aided by the invaluable support of peers and lecturers) in activities like rock climbing, abseiling, high ropes and canoeing. They are encouraged to reflect on these activities in order to gain confidence about their ability to overcome challenges which at first hand might appear intimidating and unachievable (and direct comparisons are made to the challenges the course might present them with), but which can be conquered with determination and by seeking the help from peers, lecturers and other resources available.

There are also social activities in the evening where students and lecturers participate in karaoke singing, visit local amenities and chat about the day's events as well as the course and other more general social issues. All of the above contribute to the overall enhancement of the experience and the creation of a collaborative working environment.



Whatever challenges are presented to the students it is important to ensure that at all times they remain central to the learning decisions. Through engagement in all the activities, the learners' physical, mental and emotional awareness is advanced. The three-day course is used as teaching content for one of the students' first learning modules, which focuses on collaborative working in health and social care. The theoretical component of the module is launched alongside the practical activities, enabling students to relate theory to practice and vice versa. Students are encouraged to record their reflections and experiences for their personal development folders and to supplement their learning within and beyond the module.

### **How the intervention engages students**

This intervention engages the students by developing a strong sense of community within the cohort and it undoubtedly encourages the development of firm relationships with their peers. These relationships can be drawn upon throughout their university experiences, helping them overcome challenges and promoting a new sense of identity as a student midwife. In addition, it allows staff members very early on to identify students who may be at risk of leaving perhaps because they are homesick, so that they can target timely support for these students. The attendance and involvement of staff in the activities also demonstrates to students that their lecturers are approachable and equally vulnerable. A strong sense of partnership in their education is thus forged.

Sharing experiences is a key focus of this collaborative working exercise, enabling the students to overcome challenges, laugh together and learn about themselves and each other; it helps to forge bonds while preparing each individual for the demands of a busy programme of study.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

Engagement and belonging are identified by the What Works? programme as major contributing factors in effectively supporting student retention and success. The paramount premises of the course's conception and philosophy are providing foundations for engagement and belonging to the group and the academic environment. It is hoped that they will in turn contribute to student retention.

Belonging is increased by creating supportive peer relationships through the challenging activities the students engage in. This leads to development of their knowledge, confidence and identity within the group through self-awareness and reflection. It also results in students forming fruitful relationships that will continue for the rest of their studies. All of the above are identified by the programme as necessary requirements for developing a sense of belonging.

It can also be seen that the active participation of lecturers contributes to establishing a more meaningful interaction between students and staff which also contributes to the students' sense of belonging and engagement. According to What Works? , engagement is more likely to be achieved by delivering the experience early in the course (within the first week of the course in this case) and to all students (rather than targeting it to particular groups) and both are elements of the Tyn Dwr experience.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

Student engagement with the course appears to have improved as a result of the experience at Tyn Dwr, specifically in terms of their attempt to improve the course overall. This is exemplified by some students actively collaborating in the development of a DVD showing their experiences along the course. This DVD is shown to peers from all cohorts at the annual student conference, hence increasing opportunities to discuss experiences and learn from each other's highs and lows on the course.

Group dynamics appear to be enhanced as a result of their experiences in Tyn Dwr. A peer support system was proposed and developed by students as a result of the reflective exercises carried out at Tyn Dwr. Their experiences helped them appreciate the value of collaborative working and peer support in overcoming challenges and potentially stressful situations. Students realised the importance of this support in areas like Delivery Suite and students in the second and third years volunteered to provide that support to junior students on the course.

The available qualitative evidence is encouraging in terms of students' perception of the project's effectiveness:

*"The experience at Tyn Dwr has taught me to work in a team and have confidence in the people you are working with to do a good job. It has helped my confidence, assessment and reflective skills which I feel will help me progress in my future career."*

*"The experience will help with my own personal development and (scary) challenges, ultimately resulting in achievement. It has also highlighted the importance of teamwork support which is fundamental to the profession."*

*"My experience at Tyn Dwr has been extremely rewarding. It has enabled me to become part of a group and identify people's roles within it. It has given me confidence to support others and the opportunity to step back from the role I would normally assume in a group."*

“The experience at Tyn Dwr has helped [in] bringing people together on the course, making friends, building relationships and learning about yourself as a person.”

“I feel more confident now, I now have the ability to encourage in a difficult situation, work as part of a team and push myself to achieve.”

It is too early yet to determine the overall impact of this experience upon retention but it does, however, encompass the recommendations of the “What Works?” model. We are hopeful that future quantitative evaluation will highlight the effectiveness of the programme. However, the student voice shows that the overall evaluation of the three-day experience is positive and despite some students’ initial reservations their verbal feedback is overwhelmingly encouraging. As a result of this and acknowledging all of the other associated benefits referred to in previous sections, this initiative will continue in the long term.

## **Conclusion**

The Tyn Dwr experience provides the student with a platform to develop a sense of belonging and engagement with the course, which have been found to be crucial elements in retention and enhancement of the student experience (Thomas, 2012).

Through active participation in activities that require the support of others (including lecturers), the students learn how individually they can contribute to team dynamics and activities which lead to effective collaborative working and its value. This in turn fosters the development of friendships and support networks which are continued throughout their training.

Since the experience is attached to a theoretical module which explores collaborative working, they are supported with material to reflect on these activities and experiences. This contributes to the development of the reflective skills needed for lifelong learning, which will allow them to understand their weaknesses and build upon their strengths.

Student qualitative data is encouraging and although it remains to be tested whether the experience has a definite impact in student retention (which will be measured in subsequent years), other important positive associated benefits have been identified. They include increased student participation in activities directed towards the improvement of the course and the development of a peer support system.

Taking into consideration all of the above, developing a similar project within other areas of higher education appears to be justified. The authors believe that in their particular area of practice, this evidence warrants the continuation of the initiative in the long term.

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# Using Twitter to increase engagement, improve relationships and foster independent learning

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## Keywords

- social media
- Twitter
- independent learning
- engagement

## Nature of intervention

The intervention took place on courses at the School of Sport and Exercise Science at the University of Lincoln.

## Focus of intervention

The intervention is of an academic and social nature. The intervention is suitable for both enhancing the student experience and improving practice.

## Description of intervention

Twitter is a relatively open and public form of social media in which people may simply 'tweet' their current thoughts or feelings for anyone who wishes to read them. Anyone may read tweets but only Twitter users may post them. If users enjoy or value your tweets, they may choose to "follow" you, thus receiving all your tweets, and those of others they follow, on their welcome screen. The basic "capital" of Twitter is the number of followers one accumulates and the act of "retweeting", whereby people can simply copy or forward someone else's tweet while recognising the original author.

The service is available on many devices (phones/laptops/tablets) using a number of "clients" (software that manages the stream of tweets/mentions for the user). A core attribute of Twitter is that one's tweets are not restricted to known friends, as is the case on platforms such as Facebook or Myspace. As such, catchy or memorable tweets can "go viral" extremely quickly as there are no limitations on who can see them.

A key feature of Twitter, and its use in this intervention, is the ability to do searches – for example by using a Twitter client (such as TweetDeck or HootSuite) – to search for what users are saying about particular topics. This can be achieved by searching for particular terms or "hashtags". To aid the process of searching or allow other users to contribute to a sustained narrative on the same topic, Twitter users can create a "hashtag" simply by prefixing a catchy word/phrase/abbreviation with the # symbol. Short, simple and memorable hashtags facilitate their use by other users.

On several occasions it was noticed that students were tweeting during lectures, in the same way that they sometimes text each other or communicate via Facebook. It was even possible to judge the success (or otherwise) of a lecture by creating searches for key terms to run during the session. Traditionally, lecturers (and university regulations) attempt to *prevent* students using phones during lectures. There was also a problem whereby certain classes could be extremely reticent to answer questions in class. Notably, however, these same groups were often most likely to use Twitter, Facebook and so on during class.

## Intervention version 1.0

The above observations led to the idea of using Twitter (in particular the TweetDeck client: <http://www.oldversion.com/download-TweetDeck-0.38.2.html>) as a teaching aid in lectures and seminars. In the first instance, a single hashtag/search was created to run alongside the lecture slides, whilst the lecture took place, with the lecturer pausing to answer students' questions/queries as they were tweeted. Likewise, the lecturer asked questions of the audience and requested that – given many were too shy to speak out in class – they should send their answers to the hashtag. This process was undertaken in a fairly explicit attempt to "hijack" the live tweeting process that was happening in lectures ("I know you're

all tweeting in class anyway!”). This new approach was extremely well received by students and this response was easily captured in Twitter, generating comments such as #breakingthefourthwall, #genius and #goingtheextramile.

## Intervention version 2.0

The next intervention involved abandoning the conventional “stand-and-deliver” format and placing the lecture slides online as a “narrated lecture”, allowing Twitter to take over the whole lecture. Students were contacted in advance and asked to bring laptops, smart-phones and other Internet devices, and four simple questions were attached to four hashtags. In this case, the questions, regarding psychological interventions such as goal-setting, imagery and self-talk, included:

- 1 What is it?
- 2 What can it be used for?
- 3 How do we think it works? [theory/mechanisms]
- 4 What is the evidence for/against it?

After reminding students to append their responses with the appropriate hashtag, students’ answers “streamed” down the screen under the four searches/hashtags, with the lecturer “retweeting” the better answers. The lecturer was able to clarify questions by sending their own tweets to the screen at the front. In a further development of the intervention, students were directed to higher-quality sources by releasing specific online resources (for example, links to preferred websites, online books, journal articles and virtual learning environment [VLE] locations) through the same Twitter feed. This empowered the students by giving them more confidence in their sources and led to an increased frequency of tweets being contributed during the lecture.

### How the intervention engages students

The relatively unrestricted and democratic nature of twitter’s “capital” fundamentally changes the power dynamic between students and teachers; effectively putting them on a level playing field. The intervention re-casts students as proactive finders, evaluators and communicators/transmitters of information/knowledge rather than passive and uncritical recipients. The second version of the intervention encourages students to engage with pertinent sources and articles from the very first exposure to the topic, facilitating their subsequent independent reading and assignment-writing.

While the basic lecture and narration remain available on the VLE, the lecturer’s job is redefined, from autocratic “leader”, imparting knowledge from a stage/pedestal at the front of the class (cf. Doll, 2005), to guide/collaborator in the students’ journey to self-discovery, facilitating a critical engagement with the literature and providing only minimal guidance in the form of key questions and, perhaps, the reinforcement of good answers/points from students.

This change in relationship may also lead to an improved relationship between students and lecturers, with sessions being continued online long after the formal lecture has finished – perhaps even allowing the lecturer to continue guiding and informing the students’ independent reading and thinking.

The majority of students were more engaged during these sessions, either looking up information and sending it themselves, or clustering around other people who were doing so. The provision of additional laptops/tablets also facilitated involvement for those who were not Twitter users. As such, only the staunchest “consumerists” would refuse to engage in these sessions and they were free to leave, as the lecture they *would have* received during this session was already on the VLE as a narration/video.

“Linking pedagogical goals with the unpredictable behavior of students generates a curriculum that is emergent, generative, and open. Rather than averting the “noise”, a teacher can imagine “chaos” as patterns that emerge as teachable moments, embracing the notion that not everything that occurs in the classroom can be predicted.” (Smitherman, 2005: 62)

### Link to the What Works? findings

The “Twitter lecture” intervention is readily reconciled with the characteristics of effective practice, as described in What Works? (Thomas, 2012).

- **Mainstream:** The majority of students have both mobile Internet devices and Twitter accounts (likewise, creating an account is quick and free). The provision of PCs, tablets and so on with accounts pre-loaded may also be an option in some classrooms.
- **Proactive:** The intervention seeks to engage students and any time spent speaking in the lecture is often devoted to simply explaining the format, relevance, and then how students can engage/contribute.
- **Relevant:** The content, format and “publicity” of these lectures (remember, other users can also see what is being generated) render them informative, empowering and relevant to students.

- Well-timed and appropriate media: The lectures work best when set up in advance, managed in class and followed up afterwards. Student interactions and contribution can continue well after the scheduled slot.
- Collaborative: The intervention, as described, is explicitly a collaborative venture encouraging students to “find out for themselves” and co-create a useful body of knowledge (that is, a completed/thriving hashtag).
- Monitored: The forum is both public on the Internet and “managed” in the classroom, where the lecturer can see who has a phone/tablet/PC out and working.

### Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Published evidence suggests tenable benefits for the use of social media, including: increased engagement and attainment (Junco, Heiberger and Loken, 2011); increased perceptions of credibility regarding the instructor (Johnson, 2011); promising uses for both formative assessment and feedback (Steiger and Burger, 2010) and ongoing/immediate module evaluation (McCarthy, 2010); the facilitation of reflective practice and reflexivity (Danciu and Grosseck, 2011; Mistry, 2011); and the “making public” of teaching practices (Lieberman and Mace, 2010), which is considered a central aspect of research-engaged teaching and the student-as-producer agenda (cf. Neary, 2011).

A significant benefit of this intervention is the immediate and public evaluation that takes place both in the specified Twitter feeds (the desired hashtags and replies generated in class) and in people “replying” to say they enjoyed the session, even in tweets that are not formally directed at the session leader. This is a very quick and effective way of gauging the impact of a session (whether Twitter was used or not).

Junco *et al.* (2011: 119) also noted that “Analyses of Twitter communications showed that *students and faculty* were both highly engaged in the learning process *in ways that transcended traditional classroom activities*” (emphasis added), suggesting that the use of social media, specifically Twitter, may offer unique learning opportunities not afforded in other formats.

A brief, qualitative evaluation of the intervention, conducted through Twitter, generated the comments illustrated in Figure 1. While these comments are not conclusive evidence, they give a fair indication of the way students engaged with, and how they felt about, the intervention.

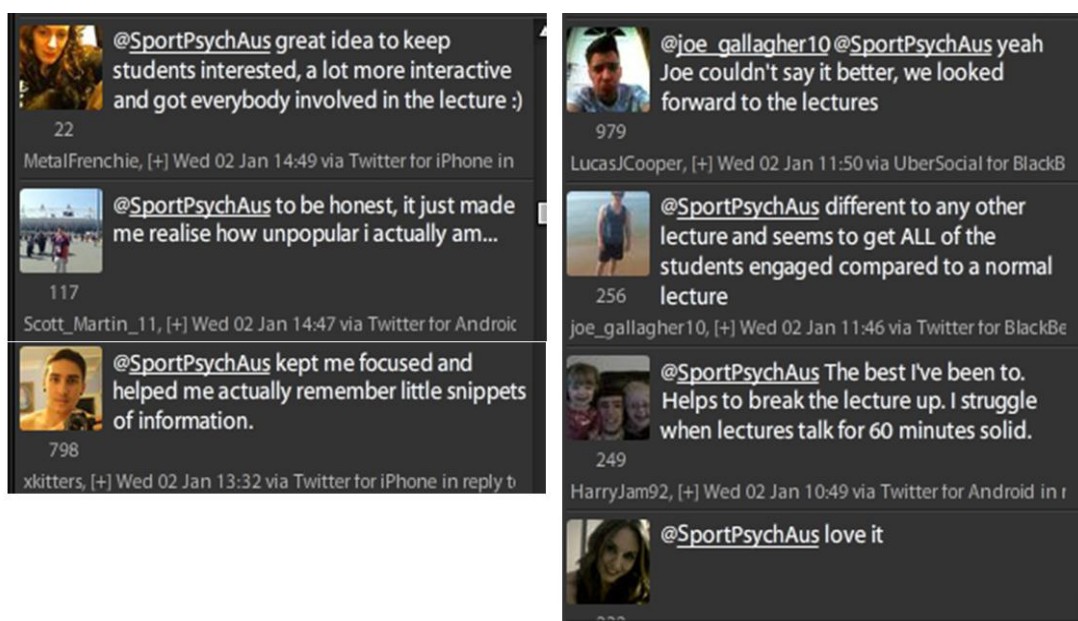


Figure 1: Comments generated through a qualitative evaluation of the intervention

### Conclusion

The Twitter lecture intervention may hold strong potential for increasing student engagement and enhancing learning. Key determinants of effectiveness include the amount of control exerted over the process in the form of rules/policies (the fewer the more liked [Cain and Policastri, 2011]) and the adoption of a constructivist/collaborative approach (Tesileanu, 2011); whilst Guo and Stevens (2011) identified several mediating factors including students' prior experience of the platform, the teachers' attitudes towards technology, the ease of access, and the extent to which students perceive that any given use of social media assists with assignment work.

A major issue is that most teachers and lecturers will be familiar with at least one story of someone who has been disciplined as a result of using social media (see, for example, Adhikari, 2012). It appears that creating and maintaining professional

boundaries remains important, even if these are no longer enforced by office doors. Current practices for managing and minimising these issues include: the creation of a specific account for professional purposes; the inclusion of “filters” to prevent in-class disruption or inappropriate messages; and weekly reminders that the account is for professional purposes and that “students who follow me will be followed in return (so perhaps be careful what you write!)”. Klamm (2011) also suggested surveying students prior to deploying social media for teaching, in order to inform which social media platforms are used and how.

Based on personal reflections, using Twitter in the manner described above appears to be an excellent opportunity to engage students, foster independent learning and improve relationships between students and lecturers in ways that foster improved learning and learning experiences. The opportunity for additional, non-tenable benefits such as improved dissertation ideas and noticing problems before they happen (such as unclear assignment criteria) is also apparent. The opportunity to “teach in public” should also not be undervalued, with several in-class contributions from students outside the lecture as well as non-students and other interested parties around the world. There is also a key benefit, in influencing and informing the public dialogue about what you teach, how, and what people think about it (that is, how good or effective it is). The most notable “drawback” so far is that increased availability stretches the number of hours “worked” each week, and sometimes students misdirect their queries to a lecturer because “I knew you’d be on here and I’m desperate to get an answer”. It is also unclear how students may react when such practices become the norm and the “novelty factor” is no longer present.

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## Engaging students to engage the campus community: A student ambassador programme

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### Keywords

- student involvement
- volunteerism
- personal development
- community engagement
- technology
- co-curricular activities

### Nature of intervention

The Student Ambassador (SA) Program at Simon Fraser University's Surrey Campus provides both online and face-to-face components to promote volunteer opportunities, connect students, staff and faculty, and to recognise student volunteerism.

### Focus of intervention

The intervention is social and professional in nature, while enhancing the student experience and improving volunteer recruitment and management practices.

### Description of intervention

The five primary Student Ambassador Program goals are as follows:

- to increase student volunteer participation in a variety of campus activities;
- to build and strengthen engagement with the campus and campus community;
- to bridge connections between students and staff/faculty;
- to recognise student participation, leadership and initiative;
- to help students develop skills and experience relevant to their personal and professional goals.

These perspectives and goals informed the planning and implementation process, which now consists of both online and face-to-face components. The entire interface and programme was developed and customised internally to cater to the volunteer needs of the campus.

Any student can be a Student Ambassador; the only prerequisite is a willingness to volunteer. On the programme website, students may register as a new Student Ambassador, sign up for opportunities and track their involvement – all within the comfort of their own home. When students first log in to the system they are asked to complete an online profile asking them questions such as what compels them to volunteer, the skills they want to develop, and what their general interests are. They also indicate how often they want to volunteer and hear from the university about relevant upcoming opportunities. The information gathered through this initial process allows us to tailor our messages and present opportunities that appeal to their individual goals and skills.

Staff members wanting to recruit volunteers from the SA Program are also required to complete an online form that describes their event, volunteer responsibilities and duration, skills required, volunteer benefits and other relevant information. Once their posting is uploaded, Ambassadors will be notified and can sign up by simply selecting the "I want to volunteer" button.

Each volunteer opportunity is evaluated quantitatively (number of hours) and qualitatively (skill level required) and assigned a numerical value to reflect how comprehensive the opportunity is. Thus the programme can appropriately recognise and distinguish between a one-time event volunteer greeter position, as compared to an orientation leader position that requires over 50 hours of work and training.

Student Ambassadors can earn points towards a Bronze, Silver and ultimately Gold distinction level. Beginning with 100 points at the Bronze level (equivalent to four one-time volunteer postings or one long-term volunteer posting), they may advance to

the next level by tripling the amount of volunteering. At each level, Ambassadors receive a certificate signed by the Campus Executive Director and official programme gear as a level induction gift. These distinctions are presented at the annual campus volunteer appreciation event at the end of the school year.

Aside from investing in volunteer hours and connecting with fellow students, staff and faculty, there are also face-to-face personal-development components, which Student Ambassadors complete to advance to Silver and Gold distinction levels.

To pass the Silver level, Student Ambassadors participate in an individual one-hour session that exposes them to exercises to gain self-awareness and volunteer-awareness. These include:

- Core values card sort. To help SAs realise the importance of core values in fuelling their motivation and decision-making, students sort through over 60 core values, ranking their top five values and explaining how they approach their decision-making processes.
- Volunteer goals checklist. To revisit and/or revise their initial goals when they first started in the programme, students evaluate how those goals have been met so far and develop strategies to meet goals that have not yet been accomplished.
- Skills inventory. SAs conduct a self-assessment of where they feel their strengths and weaknesses lie, and through future volunteer opportunities, continue to harness their strengths and improve on their weaknesses.

When Ambassadors reach the Gold level, they propose the personal development topic area they would like to discuss. By this stage in their university career, many of them are seeking career placements or are close to graduation, resulting in common topics such as finding volunteer opportunities outside of SFU, capturing volunteer experience in cover letters and resumes, interview preparation, finding a mentor, information interviews, and so on. After the meeting, Ambassadors also complete a reflection questionnaire to tell us how they have benefited from the programme, how we can improve their experience, and any advice they have for new and continuing Ambassadors.

### **How the intervention engages students**

The SA Program teaches the important lesson that university life is not limited to excelling in academic areas, but also involves serving in the community and building personal and professional connections during and beyond a university career. The programme recognises that no individual student experience is alike and hence building flexibility into the volunteer program is key. It starts by asking what students want and expect from their volunteer experiences, and recommends opportunities relevant to their needs. The result is a programme that is appealing to a diverse range of students, from first-year students who are adapting to a new environment to graduating students preparing their transition into the workplace or graduate programmes.

The programme begins with a low-risk, low-commitment component of registering online as an Ambassador, recognising that students are likely to be exploring their volunteer options when they start with the programme. As they gain more self-awareness and discover how they want to contribute and the skills they want to develop, they move to more face-to-face components where individualised coaching and reflective components further enhance the overall quality of their volunteer experiences.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

By encouraging students to get involved in the campus community, the SA Program improves student engagement and promotes a sense of belonging, which is at the heart of the What Works? model. While the SA Program may be perceived as only operating within the social sphere of the What Works? model, Astin (2003: 392) suggests that volunteering has “significant positive correlations with degree aspirations, attainment of the bachelor’s degree”.

The SA Program recognises that staff members who request student volunteers to help out with their events and programmes play a key role in educating and developing the Ambassadors. When they fill out the volunteer request form, they are asked to consider the benefits to the volunteer, such as the skills the volunteer may gain and any relevance to his or her volunteer goals. When the volunteer commitment ends, staff members are encouraged to provide feedback either directly to the volunteer or through the SA Program. This reinforces the model’s finding that staff have the capacity to provide an engaging experience for students.

Across the institution, the SA Program is one of the many programme examples that illustrate Simon Fraser University’s strategic vision of “Engaging the World”, with the notion of “engaging students” being the first pillar in the university’s mission. Overall, senior leadership supports and realises the potential of initiatives that enhance student engagement, demonstrating the institutional management and co-ordination finding in the What Works? model.



## Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Since the programme's inception in 2005, the number of Ambassadors grew to approximately 400 in 2010, and reached 1,000 in 2012. Evidence of effectiveness and impact has been gathered in various channels, ranging from testimonials from administration and staff, to during one-on-one meetings with Ambassadors, to a programme survey conducted bi-annually.

Overall, members of the campus community agree the SA Program is an excellent and innovative programme that promotes student development while fostering community connectedness. This is consistent with Tinto's view that "the social (personal) integration and resulting social rewards which arise from it lead to heightened institutional commitment" (1993: 118). As such, during times of financial constraints in higher education institutions, the programme continues to receive an increase in funding to support this worthwhile engagement initiative.

When in the Spring 2011 programme survey current Ambassadors were asked if they would recommend the programme to a friend, 100% of the respondents said yes. Students tell us they have developed skills and networks, and felt a sense of belonging to the campus:

*"Through this program I get to meet a lot of new people and get to interact with them. It helps build my communication skills and gets me out of my comfort zone. Also it is also a way that I can feel that I am a part of the Surrey campus."*

*"For me, I think it is the acknowledgement for my hard work as a volunteer that is my biggest incentive, because I feel the Student Ambassador program really embraces its volunteers."*

*"The future possibilities it may provide me. I've also worked and volunteered throughout high school, but it did make me think though that having a long-term volunteer position that can also be ranked by levels with the university I'm studying with is a great opportunity."*

*"Because there are so many great opportunities that come along with being an SA! I am already recommended it to a younger friend of mine that is coming to Surrey next year! Of course, I have already spoken with my current friends about volunteering!"*

## Conclusion

For institutions exploring the possibility of implementing a student ambassador programme, the following are recommendations:

- Start by gaining an understanding of the current landscape, namely the institution's stance on volunteer engagement within and beyond the campus community. For any start-up programme to be successful, it is important to appeal to decision-makers by closely aligning the programme mission and goals with that of the department and of the institution.
- Compile an inventory of what opportunities are available, in what department and with whom. Upon getting a sense of which colleagues are also overseeing student volunteers, a community of practice can be formed where volunteer managers regularly meet to discuss best practices and brainstorm collaboration ideas, such as volunteer cross-training and campus-wide recognition. In addition, this is a good group to assess the feasibility of an institution-wide student ambassador programme, as it will likely be represented by various departments, making the overall perspective of the group well-rounded and diverse.
- Ask students for their input via surveys and focus groups, and be sure to consult students who are already volunteers as well as those who are not. Suggested questions include:
  - How are you currently engaged as a volunteer at [name of institution]? If you are currently not involved, what may motivate you to become involved?
  - Consider your ideal volunteer experience at [name of institution], and it can be a current experience or one you would like to have. What elements made/make it an ideal experience for you?
  - What are some local organisations you may be interested in getting involved with? What role do you see [name of institution] play in helping you make these connections (hosting recruitment fairs on campus, offering internship placements, etc.)?
- Celebrate volunteer contribution and successes. Aside from appreciating the work of our students, these are also excellent opportunities to invite senior administrators so they may understand the value of the programme and witness the impact student volunteerism has on the students, institution and community.
- Document your progress regularly and evaluate your programme rigorously. That way, the programme can track ever-changing student trends and it is possible to ensure it continues to meet student and institutional needs.

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## Websites

SFU Surrey Student Ambassador Program: <http://www.surrey.sfu.ca/sa>

SFU Engage Vision: <http://www.sfu.ca/engage>

SFU Mission Statement: <http://www.sfu.ca/pres/mission.html>

## Section 5: Utilisation of data and information communication technologies

This section presents five interventions, the first two of which utilise data to design appropriate and targeted interventions. This is followed by a look at three different interventions that aim to enhance the student experience through the use of technology. The first paper in this section comes from John Horton *et al.*, who show how qualitative and quantitative data can be used to promote student learning and satisfaction. The value of data is further asserted by Sarah Lawther *et al.*, of Nottingham Trent University, who describe the importance of monitoring retention.

Following this, Russell Crawford *et al.* of Keele University discuss a bespoke series of guided study video resources. This theme is further developed by Daniel Harding, also of Keele, who describes the use of Flip video cameras to record reflective journals during internships. The next article comes from Dawne Bell and David Wooff of Edge Hill University, who advocate the use of Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL).

## Supporting undergraduates' transitions to year 2: banishing the “second-year blues”

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### Keywords

- transition
- second year
- induction
- undergraduates
- geography

### Nature of intervention

Developing and monitoring new support for Human Geography undergraduates entering their second year at the University of Northampton.

### Focus of intervention

An evidence-based intervention, designed to enhance student experience by offering improved academic, social and pastoral support for undergraduates entering their second year.

### Description of intervention

The intervention was developed in response to:

- evaluations of Geography modules at the University of Northampton during 2007–10, where second-year undergraduates were consistently less satisfied with academic, social and pastoral support than contemporary first or third years (also, individual cohorts were evidently less satisfied when in second year than in their first and third years);
- institutional data from 2000–10, where indicators of student retention, achievement and engagement typically “dipped” amongst second-year undergraduates, across all subject areas of the university;
- international research revealing similar trends – the so-called “second-year blues” or “sophomore’ slump” – among diverse higher education students (Freedman, 1956; Tobolowsky, 2008; Hunter *et al.*, 2010).

The intervention aimed to:

- understand issues and the needs of students making the transition from first to second year;
- explore students’ use of existing sources of support when making this transition;
- gather recommendations about how students could be supported as they make this transition;
- develop and monitor new forms of support, based on these recommendations.

The intervention entailed a three-stage process.

#### 1. Survey 1 (Autumn 2010)

A confidential online survey was sent to all second-year students taking compulsory Human Geography modules at the University of Northampton. As a comparator, the survey was also sent to all second-year students taking compulsory modules in another social science subjects at the university. This subject was chosen because it has a similar pattern of learning and teaching activities, comparable staff–student ratios, and a similar student profile in terms of age, gender, background, retention and attainment. The survey was completed by 60 undergraduates (30 Geography students, and 30 in the comparison group). The survey collected baseline quantitative and qualitative data about: students’ experiences of making the transition from first to second year; students’ sources of support when making this transition; awareness, use and experiences of diverse institutional support available to these students; and students’ recommendations to support future cohorts making the transition from first to second year. Some key findings from survey 1 are summarised in Table 1.

Key recommendations made by students, in both subjects, were as follows.

- course teams could provide more effective information, publicity and guidance about sources of support available at the university;
- course teams could make expectations for second year clearer, and discuss the “second-year blues” with students;
- course teams could guide students to sources of advice and support about managing money and housing issues (especially living out of halls);
- tutors could be more “supportive” of, “approachable” and “sympathetic” to students making the transition from first to second year;
- careers advice could be more effectively embedded in the curriculum;
- advice and support regarding time management and workload planning would be appreciated by many students.

## 2. Trialling and development of support (Autumn 2011)

Staff in the field of Human Geography drew upon findings from survey 1 to develop a new package of induction, guidance and support resources, for use in activities with Human Geography students making the transition from first to second year. Key elements of this provision are listed below.

- A dedicated induction session for all Geographers at the beginning of second year: reminding students of sources of information and support; providing skills development in time management and workload planning; and using survey 1 findings as prompts for discussions between students and staff about experiences and expectations of second year.
- New resources for personal tutorials: Geography tutors were provided with up-to-date list of sources of information and support for second-year students, and encouraged to use survey 1 findings as prompts for reflection.
- Redesigned Virtual Learning Environment (VLE): a dedicated, single site for Geography students entering their second year, including a new “what do I do if . . . ?” resource that compiles and clarifies information about sources of pastoral or academic support.
- A dedicated programme of careers and skills-development tutorials and activities throughout second year, embedding face-to-face contact with staff from student support services within the Geography curriculum.
- Revising assignment instructions and preparation activities: survey 1 findings were used in a wider audit of second-year learning, teaching and assessment within Geography modules. A number of assessments were reconfigured to provide more explicit applied skills development, and continuity with first- and second-year activities.

This provision was trialled in Autumn 2011 and is now used annually with Human Geography students.

## 3. Survey 2 (Autumn 2012)

In Autumn 2012, the online survey was again sent out to second-year students studying compulsory modules in Human Geography (to whom staff had delivered the new package of support) and the comparison subject (where there had been no change in support offered to students making the transition between first and second year). This survey was completed by 59 undergraduates (30 Geography students, and 29 in the comparison group). Comparison of the findings of survey 1, and between students studying the two subjects, provided evidence about the efficacy of the new support resources and activities. These data are reported in Table 1.

### How the intervention engages students

Students were engaged directly via the two surveys. Survey 1 was publicised by an undergraduate peer researcher, who also conducted follow-up interviews with a sample of 10 students who had completed the survey. Findings from these interviews augmented the survey data and informed the development of the new support resources and activities for Human Geography students. In addition, feedback obtained via routine systems of module evaluation and consultation with undergraduate course representatives were used by staff when trialling and refining the support resources and activities. These forms of student engagement continue to be used to monitor the efficacy of the intervention. The intervention was funded by the University of Northampton’s innovative URB@N (Undergraduate Research Bursaries at Northampton) scheme, which enables staff at the university to collaborate with undergraduate peer researchers on pedagogic projects (see <https://sites.google.com/site/urbanscheme/home>).

### Link to the What Works? findings

As in the What Works? findings (Thomas, 2012: 4) the intervention used *thinking about* withdrawing from university as a key indicator of student experience (see Table 1) and sought to gather a range of quantitative and qualitative data around this issue. Having identified the transition from first to second year as a period of heightened anxiety, dissatisfaction and lack of belonging (Thomas, 2012: 6) for many undergraduates, the intervention sought to enhance student experience via timely, responsive, sustainable evidence-based induction, guidance and support activities. As Maunder *et al.* (2010) note, research and practice relating to transitions *within* higher education in the UK has often tended to be limited, despite a large body of

research and guidance relating to transitions from school to higher education (Richardson, 2005), or from higher education to work (Brooks, 2007).

### Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Table 1 summarises key findings from survey 1 (before the intervention) and survey 2 (after the intervention). Comparison is made between the responses of Human Geography students (who had received the new package of support) versus students taking the comparison subject (where there was no change in support offered to second-year students).

In survey 1, note that in both subjects:

- around one in four students had “considered withdrawing” in second year, and two-fifths had felt “very worried” at the beginning of second year;
- only around one in five students had felt “well prepared” for their second year, or that sessions on their course had prepared them “effectively” for second year;
- there was limited use of available online/VLE resources and limited engagement with existing services provided by university careers, library/IT and volunteering services;
- around half of the students consulted stated they would not feel “comfortable” speaking with a tutor if they had problems.

Indicator	Survey 1 (before new support)		Survey 2 (after new support)	
	Year 2 Human Geography students	Year 2 students in comparison subject	Year 2 Human Geography students	Year 2 students in comparison subject
% who have considered withdrawing this term	23	27	10	28
% who felt very worried in the first weeks of second year	40	37	20	34
% who felt well prepared for their second year	17	13	87	17
% who felt that sessions at the start of second year prepared them effectively	20	17	53	17
% who had accessed support materials on university website and VLE	10	7	37	10
% who have visited university careers service this term	20	17	37	10
% who have attended a library/IT refresher course this term	23	20	53	17
% who have visited university volunteering service this term	17	13	53	10
% who would feel comfortable speaking with a tutor if they were having problems with their studies	53	50	63	48

**Table 1: Impacts of new support for second-year Human Geography students**

In the comparison subject, where there was no significant change in provision for new second-year students, the data are relatively consistent between surveys 1 and 2. However, among Human Geography students, who received the new package of academic and pastoral support at the beginning of the second year, note that:

- the proportion of students who had “considered withdrawing” in second year halved from survey 1 to survey 2, as did the proportion who felt “very worried” at the beginning of second year;
- the proportion of students who felt “well-prepared” for second year increased markedly, as did the proportion who felt that sessions at the beginning of second year had “prepared them effectively”;

- use of available online/VLE resources increased from survey 1 to survey 2, as did engagement with existing services provided by university careers, library/IT and volunteering services;
- the proportion of students who would “feel comfortable” speaking with a tutor if they experienced problems with their studies increased by 10%.

## Conclusion

It is recommended that higher education practitioners use the following prompts for reflection upon students’ transitions within their institution or subject area.

- Is there evidence of a “second year slump” in student experience at your institution, or in your subject area? If so, why is this the case? If not, why not?
- Is there sufficient, and robust, evidence to evaluate student experience at the point of transition to second year? If not, how could more useful evidence be collected?
- In your institution or subject area, are transitions to second year distinctly different to the picture presented here? If so, why is this the case?
- How are transitions to second year currently supported within your institution or subject area? Is this support fit for purpose, widely known about, and widely used? Are there pockets of excellent practice that could be applied elsewhere? What are the barriers to this transfer of practice, and how might they be overcome?
- How might different groups of students experience transitions within your institution or subject differently? How might diverse student experiences be supported?

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## Using data to inform strategies to promote student retention and success

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### Keywords

- transition
- academic writing
- first-year attrition
- academic mentoring
- student success

### Nature of intervention

A series of changes made to a programme in direct response to monitoring of data to understand student withdrawals within the programme and improve student success and retention.

### Focus of intervention

Since the majority of students who consider withdrawing from the programme have had difficulty in achieving the required standard of academic work, the focus of the interventions was to increase students' ability and confidence in academic skills. The intervention is therefore primarily focused on academic engagement and aims to enhance the student experience and improve practice.

### Description of intervention

The Youth Studies degree provides its students with the knowledge and skills needed for a range of careers in support of young people. For this reason it is seen by many prospective students as a means of helping others to gain a better start in life than they themselves have experienced. Consequently, it attracts a higher than usual proportion of students with alternative entry qualifications and, in addition to the normal transitional issues, a range of personal challenges, such as financial hardship, family and cultural considerations.

The programme team has a whole-team approach to retention and transition and has sought to understand the nature of their students' needs. Monitoring of retention data over three years by the programme leader revealed that the main leavers before the end of the first year were repeating students, particularly those students who had failed or who had experienced a lot of failures in their first year assessments. In direct response to this, a range of strategies were set up to support these students.

- Monitoring of referred students. These students are sent a letter by the programme leader specifying which pieces of work need to be completed, the date for resubmission of assignments and who to contact if they need support through the summer. It was found that a letter was often more effective than an email as students having difficulty are often those who do not have access to a computer during the summer.
- Extended induction. Students have a timetabled induction programme for the first week which includes "Welcome to NTU" (a formal introduction to the university), an introduction to the programme and programme leader, an introduction to other services available to students (such as student services, library, study support), and extra-curricular activities such as volunteering opportunities. Students also attend small group sessions with their year tutor. These sessions include activities that encourage students to get to know one another, such as a session during which students are asked about their expectations of university and their concerns about learning at university. All students have a timetabled tutorial with their year tutor during this week. The timetable also has "gaps" which allow for students to take part in university-wide induction activities such as a freshers' fair.
- A research and study skills module teaches learning skills throughout the year. It is taught by the year tutor so that all students have timetabled contact with this tutor throughout the year. The module content supports the students' transition to learning at university. In these sessions, for example, the differences between learning in further education and higher education are discussed, as well as topics such as time management and report writing. These sessions also include an introduction to university systems and processes such as academic misconduct, plagiarism, special situations procedures, and anonymous marking. The programme team has found that often its students have had no prior knowledge of the conventions associated with participation in a large organisation, some of which can be alien to students, and believe it is important not to assume that all students know about them. Students are also given a critical date list that includes all their assignments for the first year, when they are due, their weightings and who they will be set by.



- An academic mentoring pilot scheme was set up to support students with their academic work. Students were given a diagnostic assessment in a study skills module in the third week of term one. This required students to demonstrate structuring work, academic writing, grammar, spelling and referencing. Students were graded in six bands, 6 to 1: excellent; very good; good; satisfactory; borderline satisfactory; not satisfactory. The results were shared with students and they were asked to volunteer for the academic mentoring scheme if they felt they needed additional support for academic work. Based upon these results, a number of students across a range of abilities were assigned a tutor to help them with their academic work and specifically to support the development of transferable skills and to “make sure that they make sense of the feedback they have got and apply it to the next assignment” (programme leader). A range of data was used to monitor the effect of the project.

This academic mentoring pilot scheme has evolved since this research. Student mentoring is in place and academic tutorials have been replaced by a rigorous personal tutoring system in year 1.

### **How the intervention engages students**

The students are aware that the programme team are working as a whole to support their transition to university and beyond, and it is this that helps students feel that they belong to the programme. It is, as one student described, “*Like a little close community*”.

*“All the systems say to students we really want you to succeed, we are giving you the best chance to succeed, we are here to help you . . . it binds that kind of contract about learning and teaching in a very practical way . . . Students feeling a loyalty to the programme and knowing that people are on their side and value them as people and want them to achieve despite problems they are facing in their lives.”* (Programme team)

The programme team uses both formal and informal methods to monitor and develop the programme in response to students’ needs. The team has looked at a variety of findings to evaluate the impact of its interventions.

Overall, the programme has seen a rise in student progression from 66.6% in 2007 to 87.8% in 2011. The overall average satisfaction rate for this programme (National Student Survey 2011) was 89.9%.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

The What Works? Student Retention and Success Programme identifies a sense of belonging as a key factor in student retention and success. It can make study “a more fulfilling and enjoyable process” (Kember *et al.*, 2001: 340) and, argues Percy, is a “critical dimension” of student success (Percy, 2002: 121). Where it isn’t present, this can be a primary factor in the decision to withdraw from university (Thomas, 2012). Developing early interpersonal relationships is of importance here as is developing an understanding of the “institutional habitus” of the institution (Thomas, 2002: 431).

The HERE (Higher Education: Retention and Engagement) Project highlighted the importance of academic integration to student retention and success. It was found that the most commonly cited reasons for considering withdrawing from university (and therefore not engaging) were “problems with the programme”, in particular confidence to cope with learning at university. It also found that students who hadn’t fully understood the difference between learning in further education and learning at university were more likely to have considered withdrawing (Foster *et al.*, 2011).

The range of interventions undertaken by the Youth Studies programme team aims to address these issues for all its students and in particular those students having difficulty with the transition to university.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

It was found that, of 46 first-year students who were monitored by the programme leader, those students who volunteered for the academic development tutorials attained higher marks at the end of year one than those with the same test score who did not take part in the project.

Records of attendance at the tutorials, UCAS entry points and final marks for the year were collected to monitor the effect of the academic mentoring pilot scheme.

Students in the diagnostic categories 1, 2, 3 and 6 had UCAS points below the normal tariff for the programme (200 points).

At the end of year 1, those who attended tutorials who had test score 1 moved from Fail to Third-class Honours; those students with test score 2 moved from Fail to 2:2; those students with test score 3 made the greatest progress, moving from Third-class Honours to 2:1; those students with test score 4 remained at 2:2; and those students with test scores 5 and 6 remained at 2:1.

Though the sample is small, this suggests that one-to-one support to assist students in developing their academic skills is most effective for those whose initial attempts at academic writing are particularly weak. Feedback from the students also suggested

that whilst the content of the tutorials was helpful, the opportunity to work with a member of the programme team on a one-to-one basis also contributed to their sense of being valued and supported as an individual.

The programme team reports that one of the themes emerging from discussions with year 1 students is that for those coming from a BTEC route, essay-writing is particularly challenging as they have been used to writing in short question-and-answer style. "One student was under the impression that sentences should be as complex as she could make them! I explained that simplicity and clarity often go together."

In the programme of discussions with the mentees, other issues relating to the quality of their student experience have also emerged, for example in relation to accommodation and programme appropriateness. It could be argued then that the mentoring system has been a useful gateway for students to use to raise concerns that are impacting on their ability to make the most of their studies.

One student commented:

"The mentoring scheme helped me realise where I was going wrong in terms of approaching my assignment, my academic expression and various other areas of improvement. This scheme is fantastic, as I was in sixth form prior to university, the teachers sometimes did not feel comfortable informing me of negative attributes within my work."

Another student commented:

"The very first assignment I completed was not even a pass but within 2 weeks of my mentor's help I managed to achieve a satisfying 2:1 . . . which increased my confidence in terms of my ability."

## Conclusion

Long-term monitoring of the progression and achievement data for Youth Studies students has enabled the programme team to identify those students most at risk of discontinuing their studies and address the issues impacting on their decision-making and sense of belonging to a learning community engaged in a shared enterprise. An extended induction and a year-long Research and Study Skills module support the development of insight into the nature of learning in higher education and the acquisition of appropriate academic research and writing skills. The academic mentoring scheme provides a mechanism whereby students may gain additional support for the development of transferable skills and also affirms the commitment of the programme team to students' achievement by providing an opportunity to engage on a one-to-one basis with students whose concerns might not easily be shared in group situations. Providing additional support systems throughout the referral period in the summer is another means of ensuring that those who are repeating assignments remain motivated and committed to their own progression during this crucial time.

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Website

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# Longitudinal investigation of medical students' perception of a video-based intervention to facilitate laboratory teaching

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## Keywords

- video-based learning object
- guided study
- medical education
- web 2.0

## Nature of intervention

Keele University School of Medicine has used a bespoke series of guided study video resources to aid medical student laboratory learning, called Keele Basic Bites (KBB).

## Focus of intervention

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

## Description of intervention

Using video technology to aid medical education is an idea that has been around for a number of years and in varying degrees of sophistication, from polished CAL (computer-aided learning) programs to low-budget teaching aids. In an interesting recent report on using multimedia learning objects in medical education, Ruiz *et al.* (2006) argued “digital learning objects, which can be stored electronically, allow a new approach to instructional activity, making medical education more efficient, and potentially more cost-effective. They are reusable and can incorporate text, graphics, animations, audio, and video to support and enhance learning.” Keele University School of Medicine has developed Keele Basic Bites (KBB), a series of guided study video resources currently being used to aid medical student learning as a response to our observation that students consult a wide variety of video resources to inform their learning (YouTube, Google videos, and so on). Many of these resources may be unsuitable due to a lack of local context and poor quality control (non-professional authors, international variations in techniques, and so on). The Keele Basic Bites project provides both local context and rigorously quality-controlled resources delivered by professional teachers using an informal and multi-faceted delivery style. In this study, we have compiled medical student feedback data and perceptions from three consecutive year cohorts of medical students, who experienced a KBB video learning object being used to facilitate their learning in a microbiology laboratory session. The students participating in this study were from the second year of the Keele MBChB course. The session targeted was teaching the cohort the correct procedure to perform nasal and pharyngeal swabs to sample microbial flora. The class also taught them the correct technique to perform a Kirby-Bauer antibiotic disk diffusion assay to assess antimicrobial sensitivity. Video resources were recorded and edited in-house with each clip aimed at demonstrating a specific, practical part of the class. Each clip was played through once, with the session lead describing the procedure as it appeared on screen. Subsequently, as the students performed the task, the clip played in a continuous loop on screens throughout the laboratory.

The students' attitude to the videos was assessed by an anonymised, voluntary questionnaire using a five point Likert scale and free text comments. The questions are shown in Table 1.

No.	Question
1	This video would be useful for microbiology/OSSE revision
2	I would like to see more of this technology-based teaching in the future
3	A video-tutorial approach was the best way to teach this class
4	Watching the video made the technical procedures easier to perform

**Table 1: Questions to assess the students' attitude to videos**

Students ranked their response to four questions on a scale of “strongly agree” (1) to “strongly disagree” (5) (Figure 1). A total of 84 surveys was completed for each cohort taught (252 in total), across three years (2009–11). Assuming that a positive can be seen by a score of “strongly agree” or “agree”, all three cohorts had over 90% positive responses to all four questions, with the exception of the 2011 cohort’s answer to Q2 (89.2%)

Data were analysed by use of a Kruskal-Wallis test and a Dunn’s multiple comparison post-test at an alpha of  $P < 0.05$ . Between the cohorts 2009 and 2010 we found a significant difference in the scores for all four questions (Q1,  $P < 0.05$  Q2,  $P < 0.001$  Q3,  $P < 0.01$  Q4,  $P < 0.01$ ). We found no difference between scores for 2009 vs. 2011. There was, however, a difference between scores for Q2 between the cohorts from 2010 and 2011 ( $P < 0.05$ ) (Figure 1).

### **How the intervention engages students**

As additional evidence of the success of this intervention, we present representative comments provided by medical students across all three years of this study:

*“Video was easy to follow”*

*“Good format – it meant everyone kept up and (the class) ran efficiently”*

*“Much easier to follow when given verbally and by video presentation”*

*“It was very helpful because it gives everyone the opportunity to see exactly what to do and close up, which we could not get from a demonstration (at the bench)”*

*“Talk through with video made it clear how to carry out procedures”*

*“Good that the video was left running throughout the class as it allowed me to recheck things I was unsure of”*

*“Very useful way of illustrating procedure”*

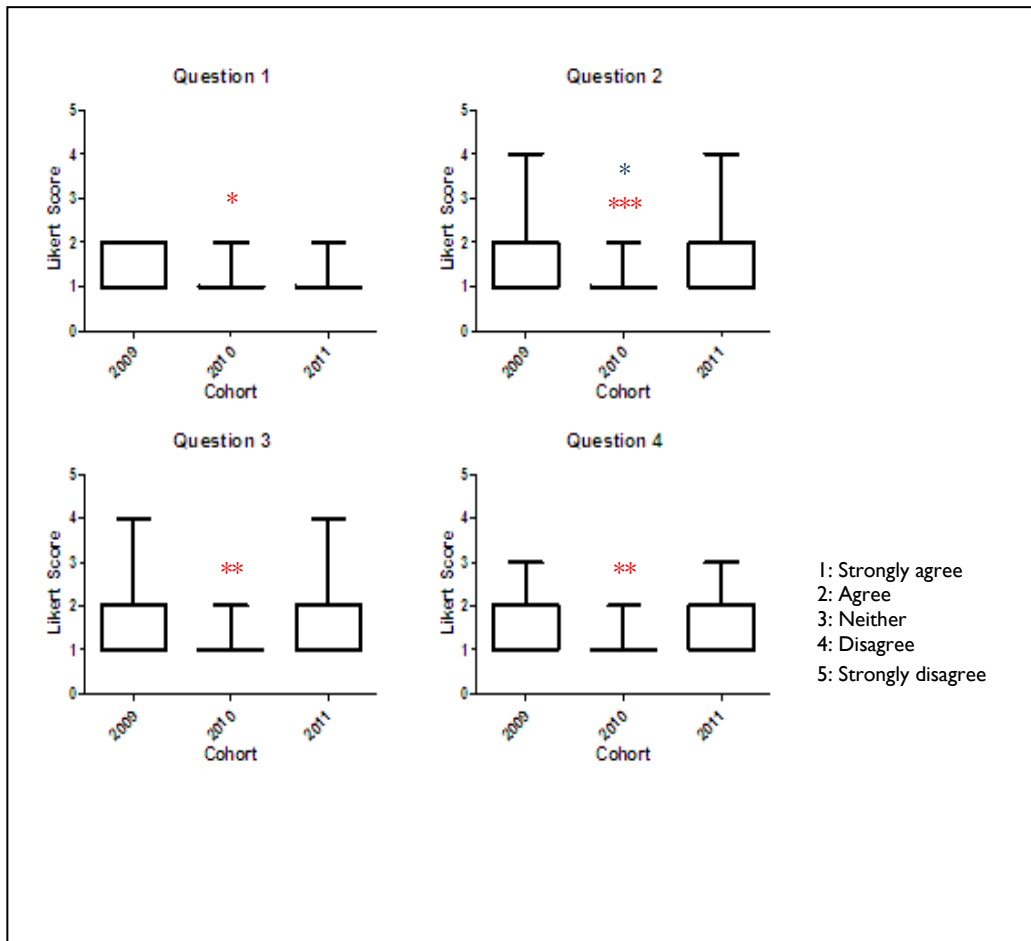
Clearly, student perception of this approach is highly positive. It should also be noted that we did not receive any negative comments over the three-year duration of this study.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

Our approach with the KBB intervention in this study links to the What Works? findings in a number of ways. Our longitudinal data indicates that medical students value our video resources as revision tools and strongly suggest that video learning objects have an increasing role to play in supporting learning in the laboratory. The “What Works” findings centred on student retention and touches on the themes of departmental culture and methods and effective staff relationships link with our project in that KBB promotes student motivation whilst encouraged effective lifelong learning (Project 4). The “What Works” report also notes that effective learning relationships are dependent on students being interested in their subject areas (critical for effective engagement with HE) and our data would also support this. Our KBB project very clearly aligns with one of the central themes from Project 7 in that our project approach integrates both social and academic elements and is the result of a student-centred collaborative team teaching approach.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

Our rationale for running this class using KBB video objects was to increase the clarity of student learning in a demonstrably illustrative way in the laboratory. Each plot shows the median score, interquartile range (box) and range (whiskers) for each cohort, plotted against the Likert score. The significance values are shown above the data (where relevant) by asterisks (\*= $P < 0.05$ , \*\*= $P < 0.01$ , \*\*\*= $P < 0.001$ ). Cohort 2010 showed significant differences in score to cohort 2009 for all four questions (red asterisks). Cohort 2010 also showed a difference to cohort 2011 for question 2 (blue asterisks). All other data showed no difference in scores.



**Figure 1: Box and whisker plots of student feedback data for questions 1 to 4 for each cohort**

We observed an overwhelmingly positive response to all questions (Figure 1) across all three cohorts with only one question showing a response of less than 90% positive feedback. With the exception of the very positive difference between 2009 and 2010, there were no significant changes in the level of positive feedback year on year. This is perhaps not surprising, given the current trend of many medical students towards use of both online and more traditional video resources to help their learning and revision (Ruiz *et al.*, 2006).

The lowest-scoring area was the second question (positive feedback at 89.2% in 2011 and 91.7% in 2009). This suggested that a small sub-group of students did not feel this was a good way to teach the class, even if they did feel it was a potentially useful revision tool. It is known that students will adopt different learning styles and so is likely to be an indication that some simply prefer to see procedures demonstrated manually (Rubinstein *et al.*, 2009).

The fourth question revealed that students felt strongly that the video had made the procedure easier to perform. This has been shown to happen in other, similar projects to our own, such as a study where emergency medical service providers were shown a video on assessing head injury by the Glasgow Coma Scale (Lane *et al.*, 2002). This report concluded that post-video performance was better than performance without the video. Our findings are further supported in a study showing that video learning resources enhanced performance in a neurological test (Raijmakers *et al.*, 1991). Unlike these, however, our study lacked the option for a “without video” control, as this was the first year the class had been run and this option will be included in future research to control for this variable.

## Conclusion

This study presents three years of longitudinal data which shows positive student perceptions of video-based learning objects in the laboratory setting. These data also indicate that students identify the value of video-based learning objects as later revision tools when first used to facilitate laboratory sessions.

Through the use of bespoke video learning objects to facilitate laboratory teaching sessions, our longitudinal data shows an extremely positive student perception of this approach. As this opinion was conserved across all three years of the study we do not believe it was due to cohort factors. Further, our data and student comments indicate that medical students value these video resources as revision tools and feel that they have a place in supporting learning of technical scientific procedures in the laboratory.

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## Website

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# Using ultra-portable video equipment and YouTube to improve reflective practice

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## Keywords

- reflection
- video
- internship
- employability
- social media

## Nature of intervention

Using ultra-portable video equipment to enhance the reflective practice of Keele Management School students participating in work-based placements.

## Focus of intervention

The intervention is a mixture of academic and social, aimed at enhancing the student experience whilst improving practice.

## Description of intervention

Providing opportunities for experiential learning has the potential to prepare students for success in an increasingly competitive employment market (Lucas and Tan, 2007; Pegg *et al.*, 2012). In an effort to promote graduate employability, the rise in the number of higher education institutions offering work-based placements is helping to achieve this, making graduates a more appealing proposition for prospective employers.

Within Keele Management School, internship placements have become a popular alternative to traditional dissertations on a number of postgraduate programmes, growing from three in 2009 to 21 in 2011 (30 applications received for 2012). Placements typically last for 12 weeks and are offered at a diverse range of companies, both within the local area and other major cities within the UK. By opting to participate, students are given the opportunity to make real contributions to their host company, working with colleagues to engage in professional activities.

As part of the assessment criteria, students complete a reflective journal, documenting their experiences to help compile a final report and assessed presentation. Reflective exercises had previously been recorded as blog entries, hosted by the university's institutional VLE (virtual learning environment). However, despite persistent encouragement, the blogs failed to capture student enthusiasm, proving unsuccessful as a communicative link between themselves and academic supervisors.

In response to this, students were offered the opportunity to use ultra-portable video equipment to improve their reflective practice. Led by strong pedagogic evidence and student demand for specialised equipment (identified in the 2010–11 National Student Survey), eight student volunteers were equipped with Flip video cameras to record weekly diary entries, privately shared via YouTube.

The potential for mobile devices within the workplace to unlock “new spaces” for learning was an exciting prospect, especially as this assessment type has the capacity for development (Stone, 2009). As part of this, using intuitive tools would test whether students and academic supervisors could be encouraged to engage more with learning technology. The Flip camera's reputation made it an ideal choice, avoiding the need for intensive IT support and incentivising it to those wary of introducing similar initiatives for fear of under resource. Furthermore, YouTube's flexibility in allowing students to upload videos from any given location and integrating with the Flip's in-built software (FlipShare) was a deciding factor in the decision to use it ahead of other video-sharing sites.

Literature in this area supports the use of multimedia, advocating its ability to merge both visual and auditory material into a single deliverable object. This holds promise for educational contexts given that “. . . deeper understanding occur[s] when students mentally connect pictorial and verbal representations” (Mayer, 2002). With the proliferation of digital devices, the opportunity to integrate user-generated content is increasing, fast becoming an established feature of contemporary learning and teaching. This, supported by a constructivist approach, can help those based within real-world contexts (such as internships) to strengthen knowledge via relevant assessment (Adams, 2003). Also, enhancing assessment and feedback by



using appropriate technologies creates additional opportunities for engagement, especially as staff and student expectation rises (Hall and Conboy, 2009).

Developing students' awareness of how personalised digital media can be shared responsibly was essential, especially as web technologies continue to enter the educational domain (Hague and Williamson, 2009). To guard against these potential dangers, appropriate guidance was sought from a number of sources, notably JISC's "Effective Assessment in a Digital Age" (2010). By providing clear criteria from which a technological intervention can be assessed, the project team was confident that video equipment could safely enhance the students' overall experience. It states:

- Principles of good assessment and feedback underpin the use of technology – for example, assessment designs exploit technology to motivate learning, encourage time on task, facilitate self-assessment and enable learners to act on feedback.
- Technology is used to facilitate enhancements previously difficult to achieve at scale such as peer assessment.
- Technology augments, streamlines or enhances current provision, and is not used for its own sake.

Furthermore, HEFCE's (Higher Education Funding Council for England) own guidance supports these principles, indicating that innovation in assessment can prepare graduates for societal change. By encouraging alternative delivery formats, previous practices do not necessarily have to change but can be adapted to promote skills that fit the demands of an "information economy" (HEFCE, 2009: 7).

Despite being relatively small in the context of the university's overall activity, a positive demonstration of how the appropriate use of technology can foster change at a local level has become a model of good practice that others can easily follow.

### **How the intervention engages students**

This project aimed to engage students by building upon a number of the "goals for learning and teaching" as outlined in Keele University's Learning and Teaching Strategy 2007–2010 (2007: 4). This included:

#### *Goal 5: Integrating eLearning into the student experience*

The term eLearning encompasses a broad range of contemporary educational practices, however in its simplest form it describes learning via electronic media. This project sought to exploit the potential benefits of modern technology to provide a blended learning experience.

#### *Goal 6: Developing best practice in assessment*

To build upon existing assessment criteria to recognise developments in this area. It should also be seen as an attempt to diversify the range of assessment and feedback operated by Keele Management School.

#### *Goal 7: Developing employability skills*

This project links strongly to employability. Providing transferable competencies such as digital literacy and communication skills are important objectives for all assessment criteria.

#### *Goal 9: Supporting innovation in learning and teaching*

For Keele Management School, this project has the potential to promote changes in learning and teaching. Providing equipment undemanding of technical expertise has encouraged the mainstreaming of innovative practices.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

This intervention fits solidly with the findings of the What Works? model in the areas of staff and student capacity-building. The rise of work-based placements as an academic activity risks separating the student from their institution (both physically and socially) as they learn to maintain an additional relationship with their employer. By including a reflective exercise which requires students to share their experience with an academic supervisor (and potentially their employer and fellow students too), it encourages engagement and fosters a more sociable experience. Of course, not all students are comfortable creating video diaries. Alternatives such as written blogs or audio-only recordings can reap similar benefits, accommodating a wider range of learning styles. Furthermore, the capacity of staff to create their own recordings has the potential to facilitate staff–student interaction, despite the majority of learning occurring beyond the academic domain.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

Feedback from students who volunteered to use the video equipment has been consistently positive. In order to evaluate the project, participants were asked to contribute a final diary entry, accompanied by an online questionnaire. Due to an overwhelming response, a decision was made to edit the final videos to use as a promotional resource and to document its success. The video can be viewed at <http://tinyurl.com/flipemvideo>.

One of the unique attributes afforded by the video diaries was their ability to capture body language and intonation. Nervous and apprehensive students prior to their placements were noticeably more confident in their final entries. As a tool to demonstrate the benefit of internships and encourage future participants, this is invaluable. A sample of student comments, pre-placement, is given below:

*"I am not tech savvy so this will take me a while to get more comfortable with it . . . freaking out a bit because I'm not sure exactly what they expect from me."*

*"The more difficulties, the more challenges, the more I can learn."*

*"I think this is a perfect way to practise my academic knowledge and what I have learned."*

*"It will be my adventure if I can work in a local company so it's a very good opportunity for me . . . it's very important to practise and learn the real world in a real business environment."*

The following is a sample of student comments made post-placement:

*"It has really enriched my university life and hopefully my career interest . . . I must say that FLIP:EM [the name of the project] has had a huge impact on my internship, it has really helped me with my presentation and report writing."*

*"For the Flip camera, I think it is a really good way to record a diary, rather than a traditional written diary."*

*"I think it is really helpful and if more students can be involved in this project in the future, it would be better and . . . also to be a memory when we graduate, we can think 'we did this'."*

*"It was very easy for me to upload the video diaries to YouTube and record the experiences and scenarios quite vividly."*

Quantitative data was also supportive of the video equipment with seven out of eight participants completing the online questionnaire. By coincidence, the number of students participating in the project for whom English was not their first language was high. Out of seven respondents, all felt that using the video cameras improved their English, with most (85%) finding additional benefits from script-writing or note-taking prior to recording. All respondents indicated that they viewed their videos more than once, proving the videos' worth as a valuable language resource.

Feedback relating to the equipment was also encouraging. All students reported the Flip cameras easy to use with most finding little difficulty uploading video material to YouTube. This validated that students were supported and that the decision to use Flip cameras and YouTube was justified.

## **Conclusion**

The intention of this project was to demonstrate the potential for intuitive technology to have a positive impact upon an existing reflective exercise. Its success has proven that a thorough approach, first considering the pedagogical demand for a technological intervention, results in significant benefits to staff and students. Further applications largely remain unrestricted by subject or discipline, making it a highly flexible example of good practice. The success of the pilot has led to the equipment being used for other school and university activities, for example field trips, presentation review and tutorial exercises, similarly enhancing the student experience.

Recommendations for those considering the use of video technologies are directed at its usefulness as an aid for reflection as well as its adaptability and potential for assessment. Video's capacity to capture information missed by more traditional methods (essays, and so on) offer new opportunities for the assessment of students. This is not to say that video should be seen as a replacement, but to add, supplement and deepen learning activities with the prospect of further developments as new or more sophisticated technologies emerge.

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Website

<http://tinyurl.com/flipemproject>

# The implementation of technological enhanced learning: Increasing engagement and improving attainment

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## Keywords

- Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL)
- motivation
- engagement
- attainment
- improvement

## Nature of intervention

Fundamentally the initial intervention sought to explore the tangible benefits gained through the adoption of working with technology to enhance learning in a module of study on an undergraduate course (Bell and Wooff, 2012). However, as emergent findings indicate, following completion of the module a number of the students involved have since further adopted, adapted and assimilated aspects of the intervention itself, utilising the newly learnt Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) strategies, beyond that of the original remit to include in their work-based practice placements.

## Focus of intervention

The intervention under scrutiny is that of the implementation of TEL in the delivery of a module to undergraduate students engaged in Initial Teacher Training (ITT). This short case study seeks to document and share the findings of work undertaken by senior lecturers at Edge Hill University, who through the use and creative deployment of new learning technologies sought to increase the motivation and engagement of students, specifically in order to explore the potential for enhancement of both the student experience and improved academic module attainment.

In addition to the documentary evidence presented, which illustrates an improvement in academic outcomes (when compared to previous cohorts undertaking the same module), this study also presents unanticipated emergent findings, which relate to the positive impact this work, undertaken during the module's delivery, is having upon other aspects of professional development for trainee teachers.

## Description of intervention

The focus of this case study is based upon work undertaken by tutors to rejuvenate an undergraduate teacher training module which was designed to engage trainee teachers in the design, development and creation of a futuristic concept product, and to capture their learning journey in such a way that it reflected the module's final outcome.

Previously this module required trainees to produce a traditional paper-based design portfolio and accompanying three-dimensional solid block model. Using the notion of *design fiction* (Sterling, 2005) as a catalyst for work, the module was redeveloped to "echo" the content, and by introducing innovative and creative approaches, the teaching sought to encourage trainees to capture, chart and reflect upon their outcomes using TEL.

Tutors sought specifically to establish improvements in student experience, retention and academic success, and the work sought to establish the tangible benefits trainees gained from working with TEL, identifying specific advantages and disadvantages associated with this approach in relation to both the creation and assessment of practical work, and illuminating the limitations, difficulties and issues arising from engagement with this mode of study.

Throughout the module, tutors used an iterative approach to formative evaluation and feedback from trainees with respect to the implementation of TEL. Regular feedback was gained from trainees to ensure that they were able to understand what was required of them and to ensure that the implementation of TEL within the module was successful and allowed all to access the work. This feedback was also essential to ensure that the pace of technological utilisation was suitable for all learners.

The strategies introduced were in addition to those already in existence and at no time were trainees under any obligation to engage in this “new” aspect of the module. They had a free choice in the selection of a combined learning and teaching approach, which was wholly dependent upon their own personal preference and willingness to engage in TEL.

Existing strategies included traditional face-to-face taught sessions and small group seminars, and individual tutorials, practical workshop demonstrations and the production and presentation of module outcomes via a sketch book and portfolio work, along with the submission of three-dimensional prototypes and solid block models.

For those trainees who expressed a desire to engage with the TEL initiative, in addition to full access to the traditional methods of delivery for this module, the new teaching approaches included the enhanced use of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and the use of “blogging” as an alternative to the production of a traditional paper-based design portfolio.

Supplemental work engaged a significant number of trainees in the generation and use of quick response (QR) codes alongside the use of augmented reality. These were creatively combined in a number of approaches by trainees to explore and aid the visual communication of their design concepts to others. It was also highly pleasing to see formative feedback from within the cohort on each other’s work. As they were free to comment on each other’s work and blogs, this led to trainees being required to justify their design decisions to their peers – an approach that seemed to engage trainees in a deeper level of critical thinking than in previous years.

### **How the intervention engages students**

The innovative use of TEL to deliver the module content aims and objectives inspired trainees to use the same technological approaches in presenting their work. By using a range of previously underutilised technologies within the module, trainees felt that it was current and up to date whilst being very enjoyable and appealing, all of these added to increased engagement with trainees throughout the duration of the module.

Where trainees used “blogging”, not only did their engagement in regular submission increase, but also tutors were able to view and comment on individual trainee development instantly and remotely, providing they had Internet access. Tutors noted increased levels of communication between trainees. In viewing each other’s work, an informal system of “interactive peer assessment” developed throughout the cohort, which led to increased levels of self-reflection and reports by students that they felt this approach had impacted significantly upon the quality of the work they produced.

Within the module, *augmented reality* is the next stage in the use of TEL to enhance the delivery of the content. In *augmented reality* the application uses a trigger image to present a piece of work so users can more fully interact with the work (Bell and Jones, 2013) and it has already been proven to fully engage trainees and will be integral to the module in the future.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

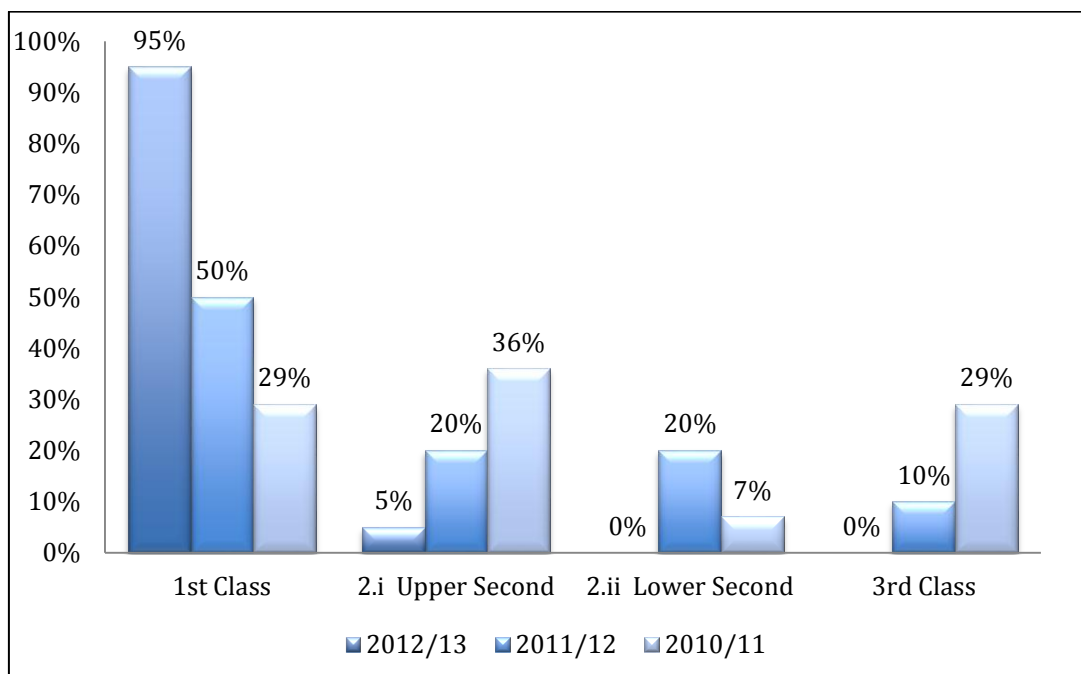
The characteristics of the “What Works” student retention and success programme links effectively to the effective interventions and approaches outlined in this case study in several ways.

The use of technology, in particular the adoption of the blog to create a “living” portfolio, has helped develop a sense of “belonging” amongst students through the process of social engagement. This meaningful interaction, of both tutor and peer support, helped to develop confidence. The role of technology in enhancing the process of effective assessment and feedback is significant in its contribution to student motivation, engagement and achievement.

Another aspect of the work relates to the potential to build the capacity to engage students in the development and shaping of their own learning. To facilitate this, two trainees from the cohort (2012–13) attended an Augmented Reality in Education conference. Upon their return they presented their findings to their tutor and peers and this was used to inform and shape the content and delivery of the module.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

In evaluating the impact of this intervention, several mechanisms were employed. Findings gained through the comparative analysis of the statistical data based upon the performance of this cohort in direct relation to previous cohorts indicate an improvement in academic success, as illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Comparative analysis of three cohorts of students**

The improvement in attainment since the introduction of the strategies is evident, with a notable and significant increase year on year in the number of students attaining the highest grades as the use of TEL in delivery has increased. However, it is noticeably significant since the rejuvenation of the module in 2012–13.

Another evaluative method employed was analysis of the data gathered from formal university end-of-module evaluations. Evidence gleaned from this feedback mechanism indicated that trainees enjoyed their work and had attributed high motivation and a willingness to participate over the duration of the module because of the introduction of TEL. Notably, when compared to evaluations from previous cohorts, feedback this time highlighted improvements in student satisfaction, engagement and personal achievement.

This feedback echoes the thoughts and observations of the module tutors, who noted increased levels of engagement by those trainees adopting TEL in the generation of their work throughout the delivery of the module.

Supplemental to this evidence, following the intervention, tutors created space for additional dialogue and discussion. This took the form of a small focus group, to which all trainees were invited. The focus group was designed to capture thoughts, views, opinions and trainee perspectives in relation to the module not captured through the end-of-module evaluation process. The group sought to provide an open forum where trainees could explore the advantages, and to illuminate limitations, difficulties and issues arising from engagement, particularly in relation to the implications for potential future practice from the perspective of all stakeholders.

Tutors facilitated the meeting, but the discussion was very much trainee-led in relation to the exploration of the specific advantages and disadvantages associated with the new approaches.

During the forum trainees stressed that they enjoyed having the freedom of choice in the way they could present or create their work for this module. Trainees noted themselves their increased levels of engagement and a number attributed this directly to their ability to access their work “on the go”. Trainees enjoyed the opportunity to engage in “virtual” tutorials, and valued the almost instant feedback made by tutors during the module as their work progressed.

Trainees also cited feedback from their peers as being of more value than they previously anticipated, something that was facilitated through the use of blogs that would not have been accessed through the use of traditional paper-based submissions. A number of trainees referred specifically to the “competitive element”, which had been inadvertently introduced through the use of “blogging”, and several cited their increased engagement and motivation in part as being due to being able to see how much progress was being made by their peers. Sharing ideas, resources and research was also cited as a distinct benefit. For those trainees with their own specific learning needs, they reported that the use of the blog and the other TEL strategies helped to increase their confidence, which they attributed to their ability to record their learning as it developed, not via written explanations and paper portfolios, but through a living portfolio of video clips and audio files.

As you would expect, trainees discussed the difficulties of Internet connection, access and loss of work through technical errors and technological malfunction, however other than these inconvenient teething problems, trainees reported no other disadvantages or concerns.

## Conclusion

The success of this intervention is apparent in a number of ways which go beyond the statically evidenced overall academic achievement of the trainees involved in the completion of this module. In addition to increased feelings of confidence, motivation and achievement as previously mentioned, a number of previously unforeseen benefits emerged.

The students in this study were all training to become teachers, hence the frequent reference to the term “trainee”, and a significant number of trainees who engaged in the study have gone on to adapt aspects of their work for use with children when working within classroom environments. This stretches beyond the work they have been taught and incorporates the actual modes of delivery used to teach them on the module. Many trainees have sought to utilise and adapt these skills whilst undertaking their professional teaching placements.

Developments have included trainees’ engagement in the delivery of classroom-based teaching with more focus on TEL, an example being the use of Prezi™ to enhance lesson delivery, as opposed to the employment of PowerPoint-style presentations. The use of blogging with older pupils in order to develop electronic design portfolios and as a means of moderated peer feedback and assessment. The enhanced and continued use of QR codes, and the introduction of augmented reality through the use of portable optical readers (smart phones or electronic tablets) to enable pupils to access video demonstrations of tools, equipment and skills within and outside taught lessons. To deliver audio files for use with groups of pupils with specific special educational learning needs, whilst augmented reality is being used in a number of creative ways by the students to support pupils in school, including those with English as an additional language, and the employment of systematic synthetic phonics.

## Recommendations for higher education institutions

Used appropriately, technology has the potential to increase the motivation and engagement of students, and subsequently to impact positively upon their attainment. However, the inappropriate or indeed over-use of the strategies noted in this study may well have the opposite effect, and it must not be used as a “gimmick”.

Learning technology should only be used where it will improve the student experience and enhance learning, or it will be seen as the “norm” and its impact will be diminished. Consequently, once a tutor or lecturer has engaged with one form of TEL they would be well advised to look for the next and latest innovation; this will not only seek to increase student participation, engagement, achievement and enjoyment, but it will also engage the tutor in thinking about the best possible methods to deliver the necessary content. This can only seek to support the work of any higher education institution in ensuring that the institution is delivering a truly outstanding experience for all learners, irrespective of the subject matter being delivered.

## Website

All TEL software used in this study is classed as open source or freeware and it is available for download from the Internet. At the start of the intervention, issues of Internet safety and security, confidentiality and respect were reinforced and discussed, as were the standards for teacher training and the professional code of conduct, so as to ensure that the trainees were both e-safe and able to make conscious decisions about working with Internet-based technologies.

*Blogs:* The majority of trainees developed their virtual living portfolio using Tumblr: <https://www.tumblr.com/>. Three, however, developed their portfolios using Google’s Blogger: [www.blogger.com/](http://www.blogger.com/)

*Prezi™:* A number of trainees created their portfolios using Prezi™: <http://prezi.com/>

*QR codes:* Trainees used a variety of sites to generate QR codes which enabled easy instant access to their work through the scanning of the code. Here are three which were most frequently used: <http://www.qrstuff.com/>

*Augmented reality:* Augmented reality is still very much in its infancy and whilst there are a growing number of applications available for download, Aurasma has been one of the most popular and can be located at: <http://www.aurasma.com>

## Related publications, resources and further information

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## Section 6: Strategic change

The final section of this Compendium draws attention to six distinctive and innovative interventions, which provide thought-provoking insight into strategic development and change within higher education. The first paper, by Sarah Parkes *et al.* of Newman University, Birmingham, introduces Senior Academic Support Tutors (SASTs), who are academic members of staff offering advice on academic, personal and pastoral issues in group sessions and one-to-one meetings. The second paper explores the use of simulations to improve the experience of undergraduate pharmacy students at Robert Gordon University. The next innovative intervention, described by Mark Elliot and Philip Shirfield, from the University of Gloucestershire, describes the support given to students in managing community-based sports as part of their course.

The next paper, by Mandy Brimble and Judith Benbow, describes the support offered at the School of Nursing and Midwifery Studies at Cardiff University which aims to promote employment. An intervention from the University of Ulster is described by Clare Carter *et al.*, who discuss the impact that changes to the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice (PGCHEP) have had in promoting a learner-centred approach. The final article is from two of the authors of this Compendium, Robin Clark and Jane Andrews, who discuss how a model of strategic change is being used at Aston University to promote and enhance the student experience in Engineering and Applied Science.



# Senior Academic Support Tutors: Fostering student engagement through supporting academic development

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## Keywords

- academic support
- innovation
- partnership-working
- boundary-spanning

## Nature of intervention

A scheme to maximise the potential of students through combining academic advising and professional support within single, joint and combined Honours degree programmes at Newman University.

## Focus of intervention

The Senior Academic Support Tutor (SAST) scheme operates as a bridge between students, academic processes, colleagues and professional support services. SASTs are academic members of staff who combine elements of both professional support and academic advisory roles to enhance the higher education experiences of students.

## Description of intervention

The role of the SAST involves meeting with students on a group or one-to-one basis to give advice on academic, personal or pastoral issues such as: reviewing academic progress with individuals through personal development planning (PDP); advising students on academic regulations, transfers and extensions; providing information on sources of financial advice and specialist support services; and engaging with students when their Individual Personal Learning Profile indicates some need. The role also involves offering generic study skills advice, for example developing time-management plans, referencing and essay structure alongside assisting the facilitation of the two-week, pre-entry HEADstart course in September, the aim of which is to foster an early sense of belonging in students.

SASTs have regular presence on several committees and working groups, including: Mitigating Circumstances; Programme Assessment Boards (PAB); Academic Board; Student Services Committee; Academic Standards Committee; Institutional Support Group; and Institutional Welfare Group. Additionally, they attend school and programme meetings alongside assisting in the facilitation of sessions on inclusive practice and student support, for colleagues preparing applications for HEA fellowship.

## Rationale and context

For some time at Newman there has been a concern about the high number of students with progression difficulties and in particular how students with re-sits, mitigating circumstances and Individual Learning Plans (ILP) are supported. Whilst considering this issue, Newman expected that due to the large proportion of students from non-traditional backgrounds (Newman Access Agreement, 2013–14), many would “spend less time in higher education institutions than their peers because they have other commitments such as family, employment and community” and as such would be “. . . more exclusively focused on academic achievement” (Paul Hamlyn Foundation *et al.*, 2011). Thus, there was a need to build an initiative to be embedded within the academic sphere to facilitate an “interaction with professional services” (Dodgson and Bolam, 2002; Hills, 2003). The SAST team was therefore drawn from academic staff, including senior lecturers, rather than the usual model of using “advisors” to provide links across disciplines and professional activities.

## Benefits to students and staff

SASTs benefit the students by recognising that transition exists in perpetuity (Quinn, 2009: 124) and consequently team members work with students prior to entry via HEADstart, and during their studies to help them realise their goals. This can

be through discussing student expectations, capabilities, previous experiences and future aspirations; working through personal development plans; helping students to understand and respond to assignment feedback; or supporting a student through a difficult time via an ILP. Through our commitment to supporting students in realising their goals, we engender a sense of belonging and place, both in their programme and Newman itself, thus aiding their progression (Yorke and Longden, 2008).

Staff benefit from the scheme through SAST attendance at the aforementioned committees, working groups and associated meetings. This offers the opportunity to discuss how student and staff expectations are taken into account by those who bring the reality of the institution to life (Shutter, 2009: 30). This in turn assists student success by promoting a “transformational approach” (Jones and Thomas, 2005) through introspective analysis of what we can do to improve student retention, rather than looking for a more homogenous student body (Thomas and Jamieson-Ball, 2011).

Through partnership with colleagues from the subject area of Information Technology, an innovative database facilitates the tracking of student progression and enhances the capacity of SASTs to feed into the existing institutional mechanisms and has furthermore prompted a process of reflection and transformation within institutional structures and processes, to meet the needs of a diverse student body.

### Challenges for students and staff

The success of the scheme means that the five SAST team members are increasingly stretched in covering meetings and providing an effective service on very busy days. There are therefore gaps in the service when staff are unexpectedly absent, on leave or need to participate in staff-development activities.

### How the intervention engages students

The pre-entry HEADstart course is designed to mediate a range of issues regarding student retention and success (Tinto, 1993, 2006; Gorard *et al.*, 2006) and engages students to foster “strong staff–student contact” (Banning in Cook, 2009: 8) which participants disseminate and promote amongst their peers.

During the academic year, students are invited to voluntary meetings with SASTs for PDP review, as self-referrals or signposted on from subject tutors or from the Programme Assessment Boards (PAB). Contact with SAST is mandatory for students carrying multiple failures and engagement is reported back to PABs to inform progression decisions.

A key distinction between the SAST scheme and the personal tutoring system is accessibility. Previously, students might take days to find their tutor whereas now, the continual presence of a tutor to help students at the point of need prevents a situation escalating. SASTs are available weekdays and, by prior appointment, in the evenings and at weekends. They may be contacted via a central email address and telephone number.

### Link to the What Works? findings

Research from the What Works? programme points to the “importance of collaborative, student-centred learning and teaching strategies” (Crossling *et al.*, 2008). It nonetheless acknowledges that engagement taking place across all institutional domains can influence student retention and success.

Centralised within the academic sphere, HEADstart begins to develop a sense of belonging in higher education within participants (Parkes, 2012) through initiating supportive peer relations; promoting meaningful interaction between SASTs and students whilst developing knowledge, confidence and identity as successful higher-education learners (Thomas, 2012: 7).

As a mainstream scheme for all students across single, joint and combined honours programmes, SAST is seen as a bridge between the academic and professional spheres of the conceptual model put forward by Thomas and May in Thomas and Jamieson-Ball (2011). They provide academic development activities that work across the professional services which students may potentially experience during studies. By spanning these boundaries, SASTs nurture a culture of belonging through reflection and discussion with colleagues along the way as “. . . the institution, departments, programme and module function and relate to people” (Thomas, 2012: 6)

### Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Newman recognises that withdrawal, and conversely retention, form part of a complex cultural and social picture (Walker, 2004: 45; Quinn, 2004: 59–63). However, it is useful to discuss the *likelihood* that progression and success may be influenced to a significant degree by SASTs (Thomas, 2011: 233–7). The SAST scheme is evaluated through analysing service use and gaining student feedback through ongoing action research via student interviews and survey.

## Service use

SAST continues to experience a significant increase in instances of contact over the previous four years as illustrated in Table 1. This is interpreted as demonstrating how the SAST system is embedded and valued within those subjects offering single, joint and combined Honours degrees.

	Instances of contact		Students	
	Number	% +/-	Number	% +/-
2008–09	49			
2009–10	182	+73	147	
2010–11	642	+72	351	+58
2011–12	838	+23 on previous year	332	-5.4%

**Table 1: SAST use 2008–09 to 2011–12**

In line with this increase, internal progression statistics for full-time students are encouraging. Table 2 (Report to Academic Standards Committee, 2012) provides a comparison of students carrying re-sits forward into their next year of study between semester one 2010–11 and semester one 2011–12, and following re-sits for 2011–12 across all years.

Programme	Semester one: 2010–11	Semester one: 2011–12	End of year: 2011–12
Combined Honours	58%	65%	79%
Single Honours (FT)	67%	71%	91%
Overall (FT)	65%	75%	89%

NB: As data captured differently for 2010–11, a direct end-of-year comparison has not been made

**Table 2: Comparison of students carrying re-sits forward**

Since a particular area of activity for SASTs has been to enhance the activities with students following PAB decisions in addition to contributing to the process of progression decision-making, it is highly likely that student success and ability to progress has been influenced by the work of SASTs.

The survey of service users typically receives a small annual response rate but data collected suggests above 88% agree that the SAST scheme has helped to increase confidence in tackling problems or concerns, with over 90% agreeing that SAST was supportive and friendly.

Respondents also commented as follows:

*“[SAST were] . . . Really friendly and helpful, didn’t feel intimidated or stupid.”*

*“. . . I feel they have help me to feel more confident about the coming year knowing that I can drop in and see someone if I have any concerns.”*

*“. . . the SAST have helped me believe in myself.”*

Another indication of impact is the increased number of referrals of students with mental health difficulties to the Inclusion Co-ordinator (IC). Many such students engage with SASTs at the point of crisis and through discussion, the option of a Reasonable Adjustment Plan (RAP) is introduced. This impacts on student progression as these students can take ownership of their deadlines via an RAP, negotiating new ones via discussion with the IC.

Students experiencing mental health difficulties are also often reluctant to disclose their circumstances. Sometimes, it is only through the appeals process that students in such situations emerge in response to a PAB decision to “fail and withdraw”. Recognising the distress this causes students, SASTs facilitate a pre-PAB meeting attended by the IC, PAB secretary and a member of SAST to discuss such potential decisions in the light of known information about an individual’s mental health. The SAST and IC can recommend a deferral of the decision until the end of the academic year when the student has been given time to engage in the RAP process.

## Conclusion

While it is clear that SASTs are increasingly recognised as a core element of the student experience across single, joint and combined Honours programmes, this has not been without challenges with regard to meeting the needs of students when demand is high. It is thus important, when contingency-planning, to recognise the needs of the academic staff operating in an SAST capacity. This should account for staff participation in professional development activities (such as research/conference attendance) related to their subject area or the SAST role, and be able to support unexpected absence without limiting access to advice and support for students. This includes ensuring there is enough support for the SAST on duty at particularly busy times of the academic year and the flexibility to accommodate the competing and often conflicting demands on SAST time; both from SAST-related activities and those within the subject area, particularly when SAST activities fall outside of the “on-duty” day.

Part of any similar scheme design should include both formal and informal ways for the experiences of students accessing academic and support mechanisms to subsequently inform future curriculum design and/or institutional enhancement activities and processes. It would be prudent to also ensure that there are clear administrative support networks that are explicitly linked to the scheme to help co-ordinate systems and diary management.

SAST remains developmental in nature; perpetually evolving to meet the emerging needs of students accessing the scheme. The scheme’s organic nature has required some cementing of processes and practices into a handbook to ensure consistency and parity across the team, particularly as team members change and with the future potential to draw on more academic staff to cover the SAST scheme in times of increased use. Thus, it is recommended that a record of any new practices and processes be produced to reflect the work of such a team.

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# Simulation as a tool for supporting teaching, learning and assessment within an undergraduate pharmacy programme

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## Keywords

- simulation
- integrated assessment
- formative assessment
- graduate attributes

## Nature of intervention

The use of simulation to develop graduate attributes in undergraduate pharmacy students in the School of Pharmacy and Life Sciences at Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen.

## Focus of intervention

This intervention has academic, social and professional aspects. It is primarily aimed at enhancing the student experience.

## Description of intervention

Improving student success requires engagement with a number of enhancement agendas including institutional strategies, student agendas such as those described by the National Union of Students (NUS, 2011), those of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and those of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. For the MPharm course, the regulatory body is the General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC). Common to all these agendas is the need to enhance employability by providing a curriculum which seeks to develop those “attributes . . . which contribute to wider society” (HEA, 2012). In practical terms, this means providing students with the opportunity to engage and be assessed in “real-life” tasks relevant to the professional role to which they aspire. For pharmacy education, this is something of a paradigm shift: the GPhC is the new regulatory body and has developed a very different set of standards for the initial training and education of pharmacists. No longer will the course produce scientists who may become health professionals, but instead will produce health care professionals possessing a strong grounding in the science that underpins their practice (GPhC, 2010). This movement towards competency-based training reflects an alignment with other areas of medical education (Rethans *et al.*, 2002).

The problems facing the curriculum are thus twofold. Firstly, there is a need to provide students with opportunities to engage in “real-life” tasks, problematic in many allied health professional courses because of a lack of availability of (and funding for) clinical placements. Secondly, there is a need to support students in developing the ability to apply theoretical knowledge to practical tasks. Simulation offers one solution and has the advantage that, because it is under the control of faculty, an equitable experience can be provided for all students. Furthermore, additional activities can be designed around the simulation, allowing students to explore the links between theory and practice.

This intervention describes a series of activities taking place in Clinical Pharmacology and Therapeutics-I, an SCQF level 9 module, which includes cardiovascular (CV) teaching. Originally, this intervention was developed to address a high failure rate, but benefits have been seen to extend beyond exam performance.

Reducing cardiovascular morbidity and mortality is a key NHS objective and risk assessment is central to current health strategy (Horgan *et al.*, 2009). The pharmacy community is increasingly the setting for such procedures, and therefore teaching scenarios based around this were considered highly appropriate, and skills developed in such a setting are consistent with the development of appropriate graduate attributes.

The simulated task of a CV risk assessment concerns the identification of modifiable and non-modifiable risk factors, information acquired through a combination of patient history and near-patient testing. The results allow calculation of a 10-year risk of CV disease using an appropriate algorithm.

The activity runs during courseworks over a four-week period. In weeks 1 to 2, students learn the requisite technical and non-technical skills. Week 3 is a “dry run” on a member of the teaching staff, before the final week which involves a simulated risk

assessment using volunteer members of non-teaching staff as patients. In weeks 1 to 3, students are encouraged to reflect on the scientific theory behind the clinical “decisions” they are making, and as part of the final week, after they have finished with the patients, they are invited to repeat their advice to a member of staff, but this time explaining the science underpinning this advice. During this activity, students have to:

- a. gather information;
- b. make some degree of “diagnosis” (including interpretation of test results);
- c. formulate a care plan including diet and lifestyle advice; and
- d. explain the science underpinning these clinical decisions.

This format represented a structure for answering the summative assessments (which occur later in the module and involve gathering information from patient case notes) and students were encouraged to use the four weeks to prepare for their exam using this framework. Staff gave feedback at all stages to students, supporting the development of a genuinely aligned and integrated curriculum. This approach also encourages students to challenge popular health care misconceptions that may be at the root of unsuccessful interventions. For example, the recent physiological research showing the importance of gut peptides such as ghrelin and their impact on satiety and appetite is now challenging and changing views on how obesity may be best treated – beyond the simplistic “eat less and exercise more”. Guideline recommendations given to healthcare professionals suggest they should “target . . . interventions at the needs of individual patients” and requires the practitioner to understand the physiology (SIGN, 2002).

### **How the intervention engages students**

This intervention can be seen to engage students on a number of levels. Staff report real enthusiasm for the tasks, believing that students become completely immersed in the final simulation. This is reflected in student comments, which also indicate that the activities clearly articulate the links between theory and practice:

*“I love how [the risk assessment] took what would happen in the workplace and showed how it was related to the science and pharmacology we’d been learning. It sort of made it easier to learn the science, knowing why it was important to the patients.”*

However, engagement goes beyond participation. There is more than one way of completing the risk assessment, making it problematic for staff assessing the performance. To deal with this – and to clearly articulate the link between assessment and the learning outcomes – students work in groups to plan their approach to the assessment. They decide which questions they will ask and which tests they will undertake, bearing in mind what they need to achieve. This appears to promote a deep engagement with the assessment task. Finally, student feedback to staff is used to explore how the intervention may be enhanced for future years.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

The “What Works?” findings indicate that successful approaches support the student in developing an “identity,” both as a successful learner, and also as an “aspiring professional” in terms of the social role that course completion will permit. The risk assessment activities formatively support success in a final event clearly linked to professional identity. Furthermore, it is an example of establishing effective learning communities: although staff lead the first session, they step back as the weeks progress, acting as facilitators supporting the students in developing peer relations and negotiating their own understanding of the learning outcomes. The fact that student input is used to shape future iterations of the assessment (and this is communicated to them) gives them confidence that this is a genuine partnership. At all stages, the team have been cognisant of the fact that staff development is central to sustainability, and have encouraged involvement by linking it to reward and recognition schemes (for example, members of staff have used their involvement with the project and related activities to achieve their Pg Cert. in Higher Education Learning and Teaching).

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

Over the past six years, this intervention has been evaluated using a mixed-methods approach. Metrics have been combined with staff and student feedback (through thematic analysis of student evaluation questionnaires, focus groups and “talking walls”) and this data has been enriched by input from external stakeholders.

#### **Local impact**

There has been a significant enhancement of assessment performance – attrition rates have significantly reduced. This module covers several topics and in the exam, performance in the cardiovascular questions is significantly higher than in other sections of the paper (73.5% compared with 47.75%;  $p < 0.05$  in May 2012).

Students also report very favourably on this approach:

*“The teaching was brilliant – every lecturer . . . took the time and extra effort to ensure that everyone understood what they were doing. Approaching the course with such a clinical and medical approach emphasised was brilliant as it finally felt like we were working towards being pharmacists.”*

*“Really good, an interactive way of learning.”*

*“Personally I thought I gained more knowledge than I usually do.”*

*“I really enjoyed speaking to the patient. Made me feel like I was in the actual workplace. I thoroughly enjoyed it.”*

*“Thought it was a good idea as it showed how lecture material is directly related to our future job.”*

### Impact across the programme

Identifying clinically relevant tasks and using them as a central focus for teaching promoted a “top-down” analysis of the content of all biomedical science modules. This revealed that contact time was being used to deliver knowledge, with students expected to develop higher-order skills through directed study. It was decided that, where possible, this would be reversed, and enhancement materials such as interactive online “handouts” and diagnostic self-assessment activities (with feedback) were developed to support this. Furthermore, the lead author had been approached to write review articles in topics related to cardiovascular disease. The opportunity was taken to publish articles written to support the students on this module, providing an additional learning resource. At the last re-accreditation of the MPharm course, this integrated nature of the science teaching was commended. Perhaps a more powerful validation has come from external teacher practitioners, who have commented on the improvement in the clinical knowledge of students on work experience placements.

### Wider impact

The value of simulation as a tool for supporting effective teaching, learning and assessment has been recognised across the faculty, and this work is forming part of an HEA Health Sciences Change Programme (2012–13), promoting an interdisciplinary approach to simulation.

To support simulation in Pharmacy curricula, a national Pharmacy Simulation Special Interest Group has been established under the auspices of the Association for Simulated Practice in Healthcare (ASPiH). Through group discussions, a need for training the faculty in the use of pedagogically robust simulation has become apparent. It is likely that national (certified) courses will become available, possibly as a result of the current HEA/ASPiH simulation development project, but it may well be valuable to develop in-house training, perhaps forming part of existing Pg Cert. frameworks.

Diabetes is a major contributor to cardiovascular risk, and such patients require specialist advice. The team has worked with patient representative groups (such as the InDependent Diabetes Trust, IDDT) to ensure that students understand patient needs:

*“[The trustees] are all delighted and somewhat humbled by the fact you are using IDDT newsletters and literature . . . it is good to know that we are making a difference and that you are encouraging ‘listening to patients’ which is so vital. I do so agree that pharmacists are in a position to really help people with diabetes.”*

### Conclusion

In summary, this intervention has proved to be highly effective in enhancing student success in a particular MPharm module. This appears to relate to the perception by students that the activities help them in developing a professional identity. In addition, such initiatives can be seen to at least partly address the lack of availability of clinical placement opportunities, a problem which affects many health professional courses. Therefore, using simulation to support student learning in this manner is likely to have value across the sector. While this approach could easily be adapted for such courses, it is important that staff are aware of the specific drivers that are likely to shape any simulation programme within an undergraduate setting. Nursing students, for example, will have plenty of access to clinical placements, and simulation activities are likely to be better used as a means of preparing students for placement. In courses where placement opportunity is very limited, the activities need to be carefully designed to ensure they are truly representative of the workplace environment. More support and guidance in this area is likely to come from developments such as the HEA/ASPiH simulation project described above.



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## Taking learning to a new PhASE

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### Keywords

- student engagement
- student experience
- student employability
- student learning
- social enterprise

### Nature of intervention

A quasi-social enterprise led by students at the University of Gloucestershire that delivers various sport and physical activity initiatives in the local community.

### Focus of intervention

It is argued here that PhASE represents an academic and social intervention that enhances both student engagement and the student (learning) experience.

### Description of intervention

PhASE (Physical Activity and Sport Enterprise) was started as a voluntary student body, based loosely upon social enterprise principles, by students on the BSc degree in Sports Development at the University of Gloucestershire in 2006. For the purposes of this paper, a social enterprise is defined as “a business with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners” (DTI, 2002: 13). It operates as a one-member, one-vote agency and is managed by an elected board of students. PhASE develops and manages a number of community-based sports development initiatives with a stated aim:

To sustain and develop a successful social enterprise that provides all members of the community with opportunities in sport and physical activity, whilst supporting and developing the skills and experiences of students at the University of Gloucestershire ([www.phase.org.uk](http://www.phase.org.uk)).

It is critical to the principles under which PhASE was established that it is owned, and managed, by the students. Members of staff offer themselves as a “sounding board” for ideas, to advise if it is requested, and to engage in discussion on possible future ideas as and when invited. It is felt by staff on the Sports Development programme that this “hands-off” approach is crucial if the benefits of experiential learning are to be maximised and employability is to be enhanced. Students who develop employability in this sense will become “capable” (Stephenson, 1998). According to Stephenson (1998: 2), capable people are able to: “take effective and appropriate action”; “explain what they are seeking to achieve”; “live and work effectively with others”; and “continue to learn from their experiences”. Being capable is different from being competent. “Competence is primarily about the ability to perform effectively, concerned largely with the here and now. Capability embraces competence but is also forward-looking, concerned with the realisation of potential” (Stephenson, 1998: 2).

The development of PhASE has gone through a number of distinct periods. The initial set-up of the enterprise included work with a range of stakeholders in investigating the organisational structure of the agency, its operation, its legal status, and the range and scope of activities it may seek to engage in. Following this, there have now been four iterations of the PhASE process, as subsequent cohorts of students have moved through their degree programme and decided to engage with PhASE, making their own mark on the operation of the agency and the initiatives it has delivered.

The undergraduate Sports Development degree at the University of Gloucestershire has, for a number of years now, engaged in a committed effort to place applied, outward-looking and experiential learning at the heart of both curricular and extra-curricular opportunity for its students. This is delivered through project-based modules working on “live” sports development with external partners, through placement opportunities at all three levels of the undergraduate programme, and through

student volunteering on a number of community-based sport and physical activity schemes. Approximately 700 placements are handled each year by the department.

This course and faculty approach sits within a wider context of the university having made a commitment to “active learning” as a key tool in its Teaching and Learning Strategy over a number of years. Commitment stated in both previous and current strategic plans for the institution help to illustrate this, stating that the university will “ensure that all students have the opportunity to engage with the world of employment through work experience, placement or commercial project” (University of Gloucestershire, 2009: 4) and more recently “to promote enterprise, employability, and wider economic, social and cultural benefit for the community” (University of Gloucestershire, 2012: 10)

### **How the intervention engages students**

Students from all of the courses offered in the school of Sport and Exercise are able to join the PhASE programme. Typically students will join during their first and second years as supporting members of the scheme. They will become involved in the delivery of projects organised and/or managed by PhASE, or in supporting more experienced members of the enterprise in fulfilling organisational tasks (communications, finance, marketing, and so on). They are then able to apply for positions on the Board of PhASE where they will take on greater leadership responsibilities. The enterprise has developed, managed and delivered a number of community-based sports development initiatives over the past four years. It has also increasingly been successful in identifying and bidding for funding opportunities to support its ambitions.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

There are clear links between the PhASE initiative and the What Works? (2012) findings. In particular, PhASE promotes student engagement. Krause’s (2011: 199) conception of engagement argues that “learning occurs in a range of settings, both within and beyond the formal curriculum. It involves developing connections within the university as well as building on prior learning, along with learning that takes place in the workplace and community settings.” This definition of engagement resonates strongly with the stated aims of the University of Gloucestershire to promote an active-learning approach, the commitment of the Sports Development programme to community-based and experiential learning approaches, and the specific aim of PhASE to engage with the local community and enhance the student experience. PhASE is designed to ensure that the student (learning) experience can be described as “deep” (Ramsden, 2003: 97) and “transformative” (Bamber and Hankin, 2011: 195) and helps to develop “capable” (Stephenson, 1998: 2) students.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

Qualitative data collected from students and staff strongly suggests that PhASE has a positive impact on student engagement and the student (learning) experience. Feedback from students indicated that the outcomes for them went beyond their initial expectations. For example, one student commented that:

*“To be honest when I first joined I thought it was just something that set up sports events. I thought it was just like doing a module but that it wasn’t within your degree sort of thing. That it was just volunteering. That idea has completely changed now. The amount of stuff that I’ve done, and the new skills and experiences I’ve had have been amazing. My confidence has grown such a lot.”*

Students placed particular importance on the learning that took place whilst working in a community setting. A PhASE member made the observation that:

*“It’s about really engaging with the community and with other people and clubs in the university. It’s about what’s really behind it. With a lot of events we’ve done in the past you go because you’re told to go and set up a hockey event or a football event whereas with this it’s thinking about how you’re going to do it and who it’s going to effect.”*

Further positive student feedback validates Krause’s (2011) assertion that valuable learning can take place in a variety of settings and beyond the formal curriculum. Students also believed that being involved with PhASE had helped to prepare them for the workplace more effectively than more traditional forms of teaching. With regards to this point a student remarked that:

*“No other module has got anywhere near giving me the knowledge and experience that you need in the workplace. I think in terms of a business sense, so for me it was about how to make everything run smoothly, not just the events but actually managing people.”*

Staff perceptions of the impact of the PhASE initiative on the student (learning) experience and student engagement were also positive. Staff acknowledged the impact that involvement with PhASE could have. The following statement from a member of staff is typical of the responses gathered.

*“In some of them (the students) there’s no doubt that their involvement with PhASE has really helped them to develop. You can see it in their willingness to ‘lead’ discussions rather than follow, and their ability to assess a situation and identify key issues, that sort of thing, it’s really come on. Their learning has definitely been enhanced in some cases and there’s a greater sophistication in their approach to tasks.”*

## Conclusion

The findings of the small-scale qualitative research conducted with students and staff in order to evaluate the impact of PhASE support the assertion that student engagement and the student (learning) experience is enhanced. The evidence suggests that the students have “deep” (Ramsden, 2003: 97) and “transformative” (Bamber and Hankin, 2011: 195) learning experiences and become more “capable” (Stephenson, 1998: 2). Students indicated that being involved with PhASE led to the acquisition and development of important critical thinking, leadership and management skills. Crucially, students believe that the PhASE initiative prepares them for the workplace more effectively than modules conducted in more traditional settings.

In light of the positive outcomes discussed in this paper, the authors would encourage colleagues in the higher education sector to facilitate opportunities for experiential learning “both within and beyond the formal curriculum” (Krause, 2011: 199). In addition, we recommend that students are allowed as much freedom from staff interference as possible. In our experience with PhASE, student learning is maximised when staff are able to maintain a “hands-off” approach.

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# The Recruit, Retain, Employ group: An intervention to improve recruitment, retention and employment of undergraduate student nurses and midwives

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## Keywords

- recruitment
- retention
- employment

## Nature of intervention

A project group which sought to improve the experience of students in their journey from recruitment through to employment at the School of Nursing and Midwifery Studies (SoNMS) at Cardiff University.

## Focus of intervention

A focus on academic and professional activities with some social elements, aimed at enhancing the student experience, with a focus on reduction of attrition.

## Description of intervention

Attrition in pre-registration nurse education is a long-standing issue (Glossop, 2001; Price, 2002; Dearey *et al.*, 2003) and has significant financial implications (Waters, 2008). The current group evolved from the Attrition Task Force, which had been successful in reducing attrition from approximately 25% (slightly less than the national average of 26.3% reported in 2008 by Waters) to 14.1% during the 18 months preceding the inception of Recruit, Retain and Employ in February 2010. The rationale for this project was a desire, indeed a necessity, to maintain momentum in attrition reduction and extend this School-wide approach to enhance other aspects of the student experience. The group oversees and co-ordinates activities which span the period from initial enquiry through to securing employment. The group meets six times per annum and consists of academic and administrative staff, marketing and recruitment staff, student representatives, senior nurses from the local health boards, and a student support officer.

All group activities are closely linked to and inform aspects of the School's main business, that is, recruiting good-quality students, retaining students in order to preserve income, and effectively preparing students for employment.

## Recruit

Recruitment activities undertaken by the group relate to monitoring success in reaching enrolment targets set by the funding body, the Welsh Government. In addition, quality improvement of marketing and recruitment activities and events are key, and approaches are primarily informed by event-specific evaluations. Responsive changes have been made to School information days, and assessment and selection days, and new events have been formulated, for example Welcome Day (four weeks prior to the start of the programme). Alongside the requirement to meet recruitment targets stands the need to ensure that students are both prepared and suitable for the academic and clinical demands of the programme (Wells, 2003). The intrinsic caring qualities and values, essential to nursing, which have been highlighted by the professional body (NMC, 2006), media (Smith, 2010) and Government (Department of Health, 2012) are other aspects which need to be considered, in order to ensure that those admitted to the programme are likely to be fit to practise and complete their degree. The group has worked closely with the marketing team to ensure that information given prior to application meets individual needs and provides clarity on the realities of nursing as a profession, thus avoiding misconceptions (Orton, 2011). For those who proceed with their application and progress to interview stage, which is essential for vocational caring professions (NMC, 2010), the group works closely with the admissions team to constantly evaluate and improve selection methods, thus contributing to a positive candidate experience whilst exploring the candidates' personal attributes and values.

## Retain

Models for the study of student attrition have been in existence since the 1970s (Tinto, 1975 and 1987). However, this model may not be appropriate for gathering evidence for attrition in undergraduate nursing students (Wells, 2003). Nursing as an all-graduate profession is a relatively recent development in the UK. However, in 2004, Wales was one of the first parts of the country to adopt this model of pre-registration nurse education (National Assembly for Wales, 2000) and therefore has longevity of experience and data to inform strategies aimed at addressing attrition. As suggested by Wells (2003), attrition rates are regularly monitored by frequent collation of percentages and trends. Rates of and reasons for students taking an interruption of studies are also monitored, together with return rates. The regular frequency at which the group meets enables timely identification and discussion of any increase or change in trends.

The project group was instrumental in suggesting a strategy of judicious use of interruption of studies rather than withdrawal from the programme, followed by supportive non-intrusive contact from personal tutors. Return rates are closely monitored and when a student does not return, a discussion takes place on contributing factors and whether the School could support them further.

The starter survey, module evaluations and the National Student Survey are also discussed by the group, to gain an understanding of student issues throughout the programme and responsive changes are made wherever possible. These have recently included improvements to residences and dining facilities.

## Employ

As this is a vocational course, the primary aim is for students to be successful in obtaining their degree alongside professional registration. Therefore, employment at the end of the programme is a key motivating factor. Reassurance of this is provided via the high level of graduate employment for SoNMS graduates immediately on qualifying or soon afterwards. This is particularly relevant when one considers the range of success, across institutions, in securing employment in the six-month period following graduation from a nursing programme, that is, from 46% to 100% (Young, 2010). Good links between SoNMS and the local health boards, facilitated by this group, give students direct access to those who will be making employment decisions in the immediate future. Employment success is monitored by examination of “first destination” statistics.

### How the intervention engages students

The group includes nursing and midwifery student representatives who highlight and advise on issues pertinent to the student experience. These students are instrumental in shaping the group’s strategies. The student representatives are a key School-wide communication channel for dissemination of information from and to the group.

There is an opportunity for new students to engage with their peers and current students at all recruitment and early admission events, for example information days, welcome days (four weeks prior to the start of the programme) and meet and greet/buddy events. Existing students who take part in these events report a high level of satisfaction and pride in being part of the School.

The strategy to use “interruption of studies” as a time-out tool, followed by supportive but non-intrusive contact from the personal tutor, gives students a feeling of belonging even when they are taking a break from their studies. The figures referred to later in the report demonstrate that this is a successful strategy in encouraging return to the programme.

Information from local health boards and national employers on current vacancies is relayed to students via the group.

### Link to the What Works? findings

A sense of student belonging is engendered prior to the commencement of the course by invitation to the Welcome Day (approximately four weeks before the start of the programme). This gives students the opportunity to obtain key information in advance, form peer networks and friendships and make links with academic members of staff, thus allaying feelings of isolation and/or not fitting in. This, together with activities during the first part of the programme, focused around specific fields of practice, that is, child, adult or mental health nursing or midwifery, promote closer relationships between staff and students and between peers to enable student engagement. During welcome days and throughout the programme, a philosophy of independent learning is promoted and instilled. This is enabled by high levels of support and skill acquisition early in the course. Therefore, students have realistic expectations of the level of self-directed work expected at degree level.

The primary goal of undertaking the undergraduate nursing programme is to secure employment upon qualification. Concerns about achieving future aspirations are allayed by provisions of high levels of support in year 3 of the programme from the universities career service, involvement of local health board staff in mock interviews, timely job opportunity information and a consistent high level of employment of the school’s graduates.

Specific interventions to improve retention are the main business of the group and relate primarily to financial support, academic issues and management of students who are experiencing difficulties.

## Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Continual improvement to events such as the School information day, overseen by this group, has led to extremely positive evaluations from prospective students. Welcome days have been offered to the last five cohorts commencing the programme and take place approximately four weeks prior to the start date. These are well evaluated, particularly in terms of providing the opportunity to network with peers and allaying anxieties about the transition to higher education. From a SoNMS perspective, this invitation occasionally elicits a response that a candidate has decided not to uptake their place. This provides adequate time to offer this place to another candidate and ensure that the intake is full. To date there has been a 100% attendance rate on the first day of the programme.

A major contributor to the reduction in attrition within the school (14.01% in February 2010 down to 5.98% in September 2012) has been the judicious use of interruption of studies for students who have been considering withdrawing but would benefit from being able to take some time out from their studies. During the period of the interruption, the personal tutor keeps in supportive but non-intrusive contact with the student. This approach has led to an excellent return rate from interruption of studies, ranging from 50% to 75%. The close monitoring of specific patterns of attrition have enabled identification of issues such as academic failure hotspots, which have informed strategies to provide additional student support for these assessments, for example, more intensive examination preparation during the first year. This has led to a significant reduction of academic failure at this point in the course, from 41 academic failures in December 2010 to 19 in September 2012. During the last year, SoNMS's excellent retention figures have been commended by the Welsh Government and the Nursing and Midwifery Council.

Financial issues are often a key concern for nursing students (Duffin and Waters, 2005). These aspects are covered by a close working relationship with student support, who keep the group informed of the level and nature of enquiries relating to financial anxieties and hardship. Feedback is also provided on the level of support given via the universities Financial Contingency Fund and the type of students accessing it. The information provided by Student Support has enabled the group to make informed decisions about likely support needs of specific student groups and raised staff awareness levels of the services available to students. Arrangements have been made via the group for more detailed financial information to be provided to candidates prior to starting the course, so that they may make an informed decision about whether they can afford to study. This has occasionally led to a candidate withdrawing their application, sometimes after the confirmation stage. However, this is preferable to a withdrawal after commencement of the programme. Student support and financial information is repeated at key points throughout the programme so that levels of awareness are maintained.

Project group members from local health boards work closely with school staff to ensure that students are well prepared for their endeavours in seeking employment. They contribute to mock interviews in year 3 of the programme and provide the project group with regular updates on the availability of vacancies; and the success or otherwise of our students in obtaining those posts. Bulletins from national nursing employers are collated by the project manager and widely distributed to students who are due to complete their programme of study. This results in high levels of employment on completion of the course, that is, 65% overall (95% for midwifery graduates), which is encouraging in the current financial and employment climate.

## Conclusion

A school-wide approach to reduction of attrition has been successfully extended to encompass the whole student experience. Many of the interventions implemented are based on existing literature and have been adapted to suit the specific nature of pre-registration undergraduate nursing programmes at SoNMS. In addition, much of what has been developed is informed by student ideas and feedback. Clearly an evidence base needs to be compiled, through robust research, to inform whether such activities would be widely successful. The best way of accomplishing this would be to roll out such strategies across nursing schools, research their impact and collaborate on assembling the findings. It is likely that these findings could inform strategies for other undergraduate degree programmes.

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## Developing staff capacity for student-centred learning

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### Keywords

- staff
- teaching
- engagement
- diversity

### Nature of intervention

Improving the understanding of staff of the nature of their student cohort and approaches to effective teaching and learning through the medium of the teaching certificate delivered by Staff Development.

### Focus of intervention

The focus is professional development for staff, affecting the academic experience for students. It is aimed at enhancing the student experience and improving practice.

### Description of intervention

The Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice (PGCHEP) was revalidated in 2009–10 and the opportunity was taken to redesign the modules on offer to align the course with core strategy and priorities (Blackmore and Blackwell, 2003; Clegg, 2003). This course is mandatory for all new teaching staff at the University of Ulster. The initial compulsory module, previously called Teaching, Learning and Assessment, was changed and is now Student-Centred Learning. This reflects the What Works? concept of a shift from teacher-centred learning to a learner-centred approach. This module is designed to enable participants to:

- deepen their understanding of learning, teaching and assessment and/or feedback in a higher education context drawing on the scholarly evidence base;
- develop a critical understanding of their students' learning and support needs, and be in a position to draw on this to identify, select and justify appropriate approaches for enabling effective learning;
- plan, deliver and critically evaluate teaching, learning, assessment and feedback practices appropriate both to discipline and student cohort;
- critically appraise their roles in promoting student learning; and
- develop as a reflective practitioner.

Within the module, an introduction is provided to the policy context, both national and local, in which the university is operating, particularly the emphasis on widening participation that is a key element of the university's Corporate Plan. The next session is about the diversity of students enrolled at Ulster, a session entitled "Who are our learners?", which is augmented by online (Blackboard Learn) scenarios about particular groups of learners (for example, students with a disability, research students, mature students), designed to promote awareness of potential problems and engagement with the relevant literature. This is followed by a session on pre-entry experience and its implications, particularly in terms of teaching approaches and assessment; theories of student learning, focusing on the Baxter Magolda (1992) scheme of the development of student learning; and the theory of threshold concepts (Cousins 2006, Moon 2005). Both the latter topics were found to be particularly helpful and relevant by staff. Further face-to-face sessions focus on assessment for learning, supporting students, including induction, transition and other areas of student support (for example, student services, library), retention and progression, and student engagement, both social and academic, in line with the conceptual model.

The assessment is designed to be of direct practical relevance, so the first assignment asks participants to research the diversity and prior learning experience of students in one of the cohorts that they teach and write a short report which reflects on the diversity of their learning needs. The second assignment builds on the first and is to design/redesign part of a module to take account of the learning needs of the cohort researched for the first assignment. The modifications need to be justified by reference to relevant theory and scholarly literature. The final assignment is a critically reflective piece on the

participant's own learning and continuing professional development, including evaluation of practice and responding to a range of feedback from teaching observations.

Learning from this initial module feeds into the final module on the PGCHEP, Enhancing Learning, which encourages participants to embrace wider perspectives, including emerging technologies, student profiles, and the need for a more creative outlook within a discipline-specific and cross-disciplinary context. During this module, participants explore their professional identity in relation to an SoTL framework (Trigwell *et al.*, 2000). They also identify, plan, implement and evaluate a technology-enhanced-learning (TEL) project which addresses a particularly challenging issue in relation to student engagement. Interdisciplinary work results in the development of a group bid for a teaching and learning development grant. Finally participants undertake a reflective piece which encourages them to develop their individual and evolving educational philosophy.

### **How the intervention engages students**

This intervention is designed to build staff capacity across the institution to enhance student engagement, and therefore retention and success, by highlighting the diversity of our student body and the learning needs (and strengths) associated with this. This leads to facilitating staff to design appropriate curricula and teaching approaches for their students, rather than for a notional cohort of students, and the assignments require practical application of this. It also promotes the consideration of other ways in which students may be supported and encouraged to interact, socially as well as academically. Feedback from participants' students is obtained during the module to inform the completion of the assessment, and the focus of the teaching observations, when participants both observe and are observed by an experienced lecturer, is on the use of techniques that promote active student learning. Thus, the approach is designed to engage students in the academic sphere by providing teaching that is appropriate to their prior learning and stage of intellectual development, and to encourage staff to consider the promotion of social interactions, both peer and staff–student, within the academic sphere to build an inclusive learning community.

### **Link to the What Works? findings**

This initiative is linked to staff capacity-building in the What Works? conceptual model. The content of the module encourages staff to recognise the diversity of their student cohort so that their teaching and course organisation promotes academic engagement in both the academic and social spheres. In the academic sphere, this means an appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of the actual students, rather than an idealised concept of the student, often based on outdated information (for instance about the nature of school qualifications), so that the curriculum and teaching is tailored to promote student engagement. The influence in the social sphere is indirect, but, particularly in the early transition phase, that many students are “commuter” students means that social interactions between students are most effectively, and inclusively, facilitated by appropriate course/module activities that promote peer, and staff–student, interaction and dialogue. There is also some influence in the professional service sphere as the module is open to anyone who engages with students in a learning situation, and can be taken as a stand-alone module accredited by SEDA (Staff and Educational Development Association) under its Professional Development Framework Award, Supporting Learning. Some staff from both the Library and the Career Development Centre have completed the module.

### **Evidence of effectiveness/impact**

The principal source of information on effectiveness is feedback from participants in the module. While the module is primarily taken by new members of staff (in their second year of employment), some well-established staff participants have also indicated that they found the approach beneficial. Comments from participants on what they found most useful in the module included:

*“The session on widening participation was very rewarding.”*

*“I found the weeks on threshold concepts and constructive alignment most useful.”*

*“Relating to student engagement, who are our students, how do we learn, pre-entry qualifications.”*

*“Appreciate the need to take varying needs of students into consideration.”*

*“Really focusing on a student-centred approach.”*

*“I understand how I need to create a learning environment that will meet the specific needs of my students to assist them to be effective learners.”*

*“The focus of this module has been transformative – I think about my teaching in a totally different way.”*

When asked whether they had been able to apply any learning from the module to their teaching, responses included:

“Yes, wide range from understanding my cohort to applying teaching methods accordingly.”

“More group work and promoting student engagement.”

“Have used some of the thinking on motivating students and guidance on supporting them with assessment.”

“I have introduced problem-solving activities, real-life situations etc. into seminar tasks, with an emphasis on group work.”

“I now routinely think about threshold concepts before I prepare a lecture.”

“I will be following up on more detailed profiling of our students in relation to widening access.”

“I have already begun to change my practice through engaging in this module – by asking myself and my students questions about them and about my approach to teaching, I am gathering information that is helping to shape my methods and to redesign what, at some level, I felt was set in stone.”

There is also a downward trend in first-year attrition, and improved progression, in the university but it is difficult to ascribe a proportion of this to the success of the module as a raft of measures to tackle different aspects of retention and success were put in place simultaneously.

## Conclusion

The change from the previous hints and tips approach to a student-centred philosophy was welcomed by staff who took the module. Staff engagement in the module was better than that for the previous version, with participants reporting that they could see the value of the approach. Key learning for professional developers included that:

- adopting a student-centred mode of delivery, with active learning in all sessions, helped to model that behaviour for participants to follow in their own practice;
- having assignments that were mainly rooted in, and of benefit to, practice helped busy people to see the value of completing the tasks;
- having participants investigate the nature of their student cohort helped to convince them of the diversity of students in the institution and the need for appropriate approaches to their teaching;
- the theory of threshold concepts resonated with many participants in relation to ideas within their disciplines that cause problems for students;
- linking teaching observations specifically to student engagement in the class helped participants to reflect on current practice.

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# Synergy, variety and relationships: The key to learning and teaching innovation in Engineering?

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## Keywords

- synergy
- variety
- relationships
- learning and teaching innovation
- engineering education

## Nature of intervention

This article shows how strategic change can provide a useful method of promoting learning and teaching excellence. Starting with the argument that one of the main challenges in promoting organisational change is the question of *how to engage staff*, a strategic model of learning and teaching excellence is proposed.

## Focus of intervention

The strategy is academic and professional in nature. It is aimed at enhancing the student experience *and* improving professional practice across all areas of the School of Engineering and Applied Science.

## Description of intervention

This intervention was developed by one of the paper's authors in his role as Head of Learning and Teaching Development within the School of Engineering and Applied Science at Aston University. It aimed to provide the School with a strategy that would enhance the student experience and in doing so promote student success.

Considering a broad global and historical context, it may be argued that as a profession, engineering has, over the past half a century, changed from being the foundation for industrial change to become an important driver of future sustainable development. Key to the success of engineering is engineering education; yet at a time when we need to attract more young people into engineering, universities in the UK continue to experience difficulties in retaining engineering students, with an increase in evidence suggesting that in the UK, higher education is failing to produce engineering graduates equipped with the necessary skills and competencies required to operate effectively within the profession (Spinks *et al.* 2006; CBI, 2008; Bawden, 2010). This case study highlights one School's response to this issue. It outlines a bespoke learning and teaching development strategy which, whilst originally developed for an Engineering education context, has the potential to be of value across all higher education settings and disciplines.

## Top-level themes

Based on evidence generated from a wide range of sources, including a School Away Day, quantitative indicators such as the National Student Survey (NSS), student focus-group feedback, and academic literature about learning and teaching, five top-level themes were identified as key to the future success of the School, its students and staff:

- first-year experience and transition;
- communication;
- student engagement;
- teaching development; and
- employability.

These themes were then captured as actions within a conceptual model previously developed by the paper's authors to promote the student learning experience. Forming the basis of the strategy, the concepts encapsulated within the model were deliberately expressed as a formula and represented as "an approach to engineering education" that could be used across the School. In its simplest form the model, which is described hereafter as SVR, is expressed thus:

*Synergy + Variety + Relationships = Environment for Success*  
(Clark and Andrews, 2011)

Together with an appreciation of technology, the above concepts were considered a credible and helpful focus for the creation of a learning environment in which incoming students could be provided with the means to succeed. Importantly, the model was articulated in such a way as to be accessible to colleagues from an engineering background (as opposed to educational experts or staff developers). Indeed, the ability to communicate with staff in a clear and meaningful way was identified as key to the successful implementation of the strategy.

Each of the concepts yielded three initial actions that were considered the highest priority. These were articulated in an action plan that helped to focus activity across the School. The concepts and an overview of the actions taken are now discussed with a particular focus on how each formed part of the SVR model.

### Action plan

Based on the premise that collegiality is central to the success of the School, prior to the development of the action plan, steps were taken to gain the cooperation and agreement of individual subject group heads. Indeed, during a period of six weeks prior to the finalisation of the action plan, meetings were held with each head to introduce the idea of a learning and teaching development strategy, to understand the local issues and to establish the support of each group.

Looking at the concepts in turn, the actions required in order to address the top-level themes soon become apparent.

### Synergy

Synergy refers to the need for coherency through all aspects of the Engineering education pathway. From the pre-university experience, through university, to employment and learning beyond university, there is a need to ensure that subjects and experiences have relevance and are connected. This includes taking account of A-level learning, professional body and employer requirements, and within the university, ensuring learning outcomes are defined and met through effective teaching and appropriate assessment.

This concept is driven by the common student comment suggesting that the programme structure and delivery are fragmented and the holistic meaning is often lost. Exploring the synergy at all stages helps to minimise this loss of meaning.

Actions within this concept consider the development of a new first year skills module to develop programme coherency for all programmes across the School (pilot in 2013–14); the arrangement of briefing sessions to inform staff about what students are learning before arriving at the university; and setting up a group to specifically focus on the Maths challenges for incoming students and to respond accordingly.

Each of these actions is very much focused on the first year student experience and helping to create a sense of meaning and belonging, as well as practical academic support. Although student focused, the action to inform staff is about matching expectations and ensuring that student success is the main focus.

### Variety

Discussions with students emphasised the need to promote engagement through innovative and evidence-based teaching practice. Today's students are used to a fast-moving, multi-dimensional existence – something that needs to be considered when developing a learning experience. This is where the variety element of SVR comes into play and actions need to be taken to make the learning space somewhere in which the students want to engage with learning.

An acknowledgement that teachers are in the "driving seat" provided the impetus for colleagues to explore different approaches to teaching and a programme of seminars has been developed which allows colleagues to share good practice while investigating new approaches. These meetings are referred to as the Learning and Teaching Forum and are held monthly. With the advent of an Engineering Education Research Group in the School, the Forum promotes a more scholarly approach to learning and teaching development. In one area, problem based learning was rolled out across the first year cohort. This is being contemporaneously evaluated using an action research approach – making sure that the SVR element of the student experience can be understood and critiqued, rather than just being based on anecdotal evidence.

At several points in developing the strategy, the statement was made that the thoughts of staff need to be embraced and acted upon. The many demands on academic colleagues meant that for learning and teaching to be developed, support mechanisms

needed to be put into place – with colleagues being given the opportunity to discuss their teaching in an open and reflexive environment.

For the majority of colleagues, the most effective way of promoting good teaching practice was identified as “peer observation” of teaching. Conducted in a supportive and non-judgemental manner, a strategy was put into place to encourage all those engaged in teaching to participate as observers and to be observed. Taking into account the SVR model, colleagues have been encouraged to develop mutually supportive relationships based upon scholarship and professionalism.

In addition to promoting peer observation, steps were put into place to maximise the number of colleagues who had either completed a professional post-graduate certificate in teaching and learning, or who were registered as HEA Fellows. A series of workshops has been developed, each with the aim of promoting good teaching while enabling colleagues to develop their professional portfolio.

Working together in a synergetic and reciprocal manner, colleagues have been encouraged to put into place a variety of learning and teaching approaches. Change and innovation are encouraged and colleagues supported to think about what actions can be taken to improve their own and others’ teaching.

## Relationships

Evidence within the School suggested that the student first year experience was something that colleagues need to focus considerable attention on. The transition to university is challenging for many students and the steps taken to engender a sense of belonging represent an important factor in promoting success (Thomas, 2012). Building on the premise that relationships are central to student belonging, an academic tutoring programme was introduced across the School with the intention of aiding first year transition and providing students in all years with a “named” academic contract. Additionally plans are underway to introduce and roll out a pilot “opt-out” peer mentoring programme for all first year students within two of the five subject groups from October 2013 – with peer mentors being recruited in the summer term of 2013.

Attendance in class is a way for students to develop relationships both with peers and staff, and is a major way to facilitate learning. In considering class attendance the different approaches to monitoring this (both manually and electronically) are being reviewed and a process is being developed to respond accordingly to student needs, especially in the case of first-year students, in order to promote effective learning and a sense of belonging.

It is envisaged that by putting into place a variety of interventions, students will be able to develop meaningful relationships with staff and peers and in doing so experience a synergetic and successful learning experience.

Focus groups and student surveys revealed that despite the advent of social networking and e-generation learners, students still crave contact with staff and opportunities to express their feelings about their experience. This longing for personal contact reiterates the need for students to be given the opportunity to develop meaningful and open relationships with their tutors in which they can provide the School with regular and contemporaneous feedback on how they are experiencing their education.

In considering how to address this, a variety of different actions were put into place from September 2012. Such actions included: running regular focus groups to which all students are invited, to air their perceptions of the School and discuss their experiences; developing a standard feedback questionnaire to be disseminated across all programmes at the end of the first teaching period; and providing regular opportunities for all students to meet with their teaching staff to discuss progress (rather than restricting this to course-reps only).

The need to enhance two-way communication in a synergetic and meaningful way has meant that during the term, staff and students have taken advantage of the variety of methods of communication offered. The impact on the student experience has been that academic, social and environmental problems are dealt with effectively and efficiently in a timely manner. This in itself has had a notable impact on how the School is perceived by students.

## Technology

The conceptual model did not initially include a separate component that focused on technology in learning, but after much discussion the decision was taken to include this as several drivers within the School and wider university focused on this area.

The basic premise is that technology, when used appropriately, can enhance learning. The three actions identified were focused on an improved student experience through a consistent use of the virtual learning environment (VLE); promoting the use of lecture capture; and exploring wider use of learner response systems.

## Final thoughts

Aston University prides itself on its links with industry and high level of graduate employability. To capitalise on this, the actions in all areas of the conceptual model have taken account of this aspect and promoted greater contact between the School, the university careers service and employers. Regular meetings are held with the careers service and steps are underway to build an employers forum of companies willing to bring a vital “industry” voice into the curriculum.

There were many more actions in addition to those identified in this paper. By focusing on three at a time under each concept, the aim is to achieve meaningful change. As progress is made, new actions will be raised up to receive closer attention.

## Link to the What Works? findings

The focus of the SVR model has been to provide a coherent and inclusive strategy for learning and teaching development and enhancing the student experience. Underlying the model is the belief that creating a thriving community where relationships are strong, support is available and learning is effective is the most valuable for all concerned. Creating this sense of belonging is very much in line with the findings of the What Works? project. In fact, the findings have been a key driver in the formulation of the strategy to ensure the first year experience is fully considered.

## Evidence of effectiveness/impact

This is very much a work in progress, but initial indicators are that the identified actions are promoting change and an improved environment across the School.

The indicators include:

- the adoption of peer observation of teaching involving all staff;
- increased attendance at Learning and Teaching Forum sessions;
- increased use of lecture capture;
- high levels of student satisfaction expressed in student focus groups;
- greater dialogue between students and staff on all issues.

## Conclusion

This paper explores a learning and teaching development strategy that is based on a newly developed conceptual model. Although developed for and applied to the area of Engineering education, the approach could be applied more widely and to other disciplines. Key features have been the inclusive nature of the strategy development, the focus on key actions, the engagement of both staff and students and the change being experienced across the whole School as impact is felt.

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## Concluding Remarks

Following the success of the first volume of this Compendium, it has been encouraging to see the amount of creativity across the sector that is being employed to address the subject of student retention and success. This second volume offers institutions, teams and individuals a diverse range of ideas that can be considered when promoting student success.

Having adopted a similar format to the first volume, the hope is that both volumes will become a well-used resource as institutions face the challenges presented by a modern, ever-changing higher education landscape. The interventions, many of which are still developing and generating evidence of impact, are drawn from across a range of disciplines and situations, yet in the vast majority of cases the specific locations are unimportant as the ideas can be adapted to a range of different environments.

The interventions included engage students academically, socially and professionally, but the common theme is a focus on student success. Similar themes to the findings of the original What Works? programme underpin many of the interventions, with creating a sense of belonging being dominant throughout the Compendium. The blend of strategic and operational is deliberate, as it reminds us that we need to be thinking on several different levels as we create our institutional environments.

The transition of new students into a university is an exciting yet challenging time for both students and staff. By better understanding this phase of a student's journey, institutions can make best use of their available resources to ensure students receive the very best experience possible; one that provides support yet promotes independence and is centred on learning – learning that will help develop the professionals of the future. The challenges are multi-dimensional, yet hopefully this Compendium demonstrates that as a result of innovation across the sector, the solutions and opportunities are real, practical and engaging.

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