

Psychology in Action: An innovative approach to induction

Dr Penney Upton, Charlotte Taylor & Professor Dominic Upton

University of Worcester

(c.e.taylor@worc.ac.uk)

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Context

Over the past decade, there has been a significant growth nationally in students entering into Higher Education (HE). The University of Worcester has also experienced an increase in student numbers, with applications up 10% on 2008 making it the fastest growing University in Britain (Times, 2009). In line with the University's growth, applications for the undergraduate Psychology programmes have also increased, with 170 students admitted in September 2009.

However, with an increase in numbers comes the pressure to retain students. The non-completion of first year students in HE has become a perennial concern and recent government statistics estimate that the current rate is at 17%. Despite a slight reduction in the last 10 years, retention remains a salient policy issue (Christie et al, 2004). With current government drives aimed at minimising rates of 'non-completion' (Department for Education and Skills, 2004), the phenomenon of student retention has received considerable attention. A need to evaluate the current support systems available to the undergraduate student, specifically during their induction programme has been identified. Edward (2001) suggests that the induction process should be designed to develop a sense of belonging to a wider University community and the feeling of being part of a caring organisation. The first week of university can be a daunting experience, especially where intake numbers are large, despite the fact that induction programmes have been designed to help students adjust to university life (Hassanien & Barber, 2007).

Induction in the Psychological Sciences

Traditionally, the induction programme in the Psychological Sciences has been delivered en masse in a lecture theatre, with students presented with a plethora of information including course-related matters, Information and Learning Services (ILS) and registry services. In September 2008, the induction programme was reviewed in an attempt to provide more user friendly, subject specific programmes. In response to this change and to the increasing admission numbers, the Psychological Sciences unit at University of Worcester developed its induction programme further in September 2009 with the objective of promoting a distinctive course culture and sense of belonging for students. As part of the re-designed induction programme, the department organised a one day event at an Outward Bounds Centre, which specialises in team building activities. The event was designed to provide students with the opportunity to get to know each other and the members of the Psychology staff team in a more relaxed atmosphere outside of the university setting. It was also hoped that the event would enable students to feel more at ease about starting university and have some fun in the process. The students were divided into groups and an Instructor allocated to each group. Members of the Psychology staff team (including research staff and postgraduate students) were also encouraged to get involved. Over the course of the morning, the students completed 14 activities, each designed to develop their communication skills, encourage effective team working and their ability to problem solve.

At the outset of the day, students were given two questions to consider throughout their morning:

- Why did we bring you here?
- What is the relevance of psychology to this morning's activities?

At the end of the event, students were provided with an information sheet that explained the reasoning behind the event and emphasised the importance of effective team work within the department between undergraduate students, post-graduate students and staff. The debrief sheet further considered how the various areas of psychology (e.g. occupational, social, educational, cognitive and neuropsychology) could be applied to the morning's activities. Students were encouraged to follow up these ideas in the set text for the Introduction to Psychology modules.

Method

A total of 100 first year psychology students attended the event. The students ranged in age from 18-50 years and included 27 males and 60 females. In total, 18 members of the Psychology staff team attended including members of academic and support staff. Feedback was sought from both students and members of the Psychology staff team using a self completion questionnaire which contained both open and closed questions.

Student questionnaire

The survey comprised six statements designed to assess students' perceptions of the event. These included: 'The Psychology in Action event was enjoyable', 'The event was well organised', 'I was given sufficient information prior to the event', 'The event has enabled me to get to know other students', 'The event has enable me to get to know the Psychology staff team', 'The event has made me feel more at ease about starting university'. Responses were scored on a 5-point likert scale (1 = strongly disagree through to 5 = strongly agree). Open ended questions identified what respondents enjoyed about the event, what they did not like and suggestions for how the event could be improved.

Staff questionnaire

Fixed responses were modified for the staff survey to include staff perceptions regarding how it might help the transition to HE, the impact that it had on the students in terms of getting to know each other, and whether the event should become a regular feature on the induction programme. Responses were scored on a 5-point likert scale.

The questionnaire was administered to all students (n=100; response rate 88%) and members of staff (n=18; response rate 72%) after the event.

Results - Student feedback

Table 1 illustrates the demographics of the students who participated in the survey.

Table 1. Student demographics

Degree course	Frequency (n=88)	Percent (%)
Single Honours Psychology	53	60.2
Business Psychology	3	3.4
Counselling Psychology	12	13.6
Forensic Psychology	1	1.1
Healthy Psychology	1	1.1
Psychology Diploma	2	2.3
Joint Honours	11	12.5
Sports Psychology	4	4.5
Study mode		
Full time	87	98.9
Part time	0	0

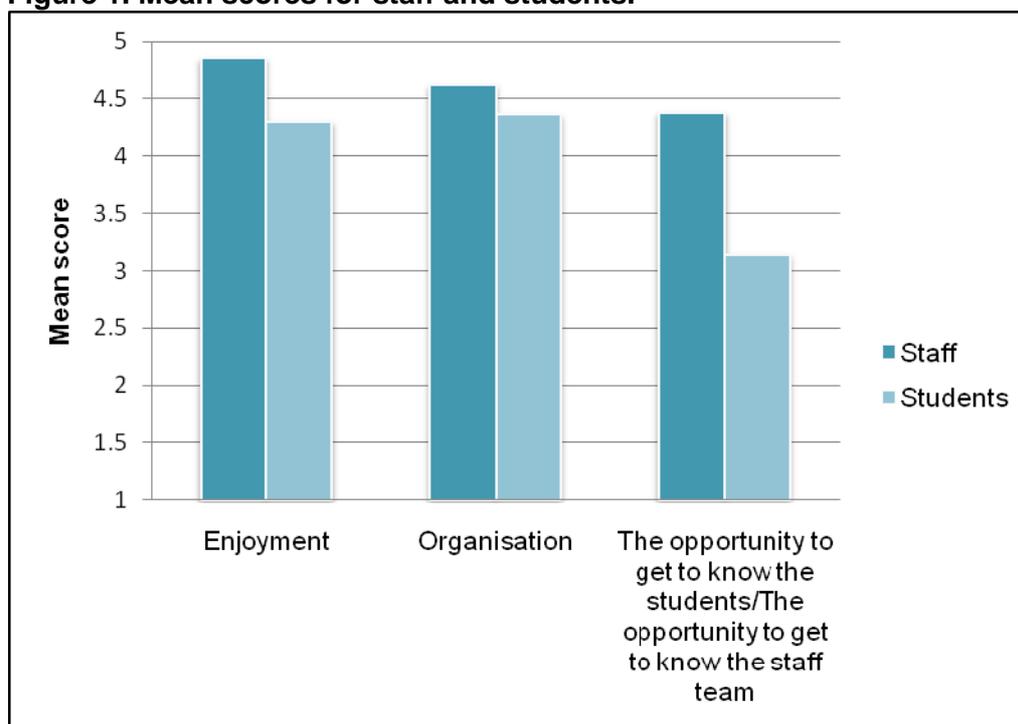
The majority of students (89.8%) agreed that the Psychology in Action event was an enjoyable experience. They also agreed (89%) that the event was well organised. There was mixed response regarding the information given prior to the event (37.5% neither disagreed or agreed and 31% agreed). However, students stated that the event had provided an opportunity for them to get to know each other (94% agreed). In contrast, only 28.4% of students agreed that the event enabled them to get to know the Psychology staff team and 43.2% expressed no opinion. Students were also asked whether the event had made them feel more at ease about starting university. A large number of students agreed (48.9%) that the event had made them feel at ease. However, a similar proportion of students (33%) did not either disagree or agree.

Staff feedback

The majority of staff (84.6%) agreed that the Psychology in Action event was an enjoyable experience. They also agreed (61.5% strongly agreed and 38.5% agreed) that the event was well organised. Similarly to the student feedback, staff indicated that the event provided an opportunity for the students to get to know each other with 100% agreement (92.3% strongly agreed and 7.7% agreed). However, in contrast to the student feedback, 61.5% of staff felt that the event had enabled them to get to know the students – notably higher. Staff were also asked whether the events such as Psychology in Action can ease anxiety levels in students. The majority of staff agreed (53.8% agreed and 38.5% strongly agreed). Staff also stated (92.3% strongly agreed and 7.7% agreed) that the event should become a regular feature on the induction programme.

In order to investigate any potential differences between staff and students, the means of staff and students' attitudes regarding their enjoyment of the event, the organisation of the event and the opportunity the event provided for them to get to know each other were calculated using an independent t-test. On average, staff perceived the event to be more enjoyable ($M=4.85$, $SD=.038$) than the students ($M=4.29$, $SD=0.86$). An independent t-test revealed a significant difference $t(99) = -2.27$, $p<0.05$ between the staff and students. However, differences in the mean scores are notably small (See figure 1).

Figure 1. Mean scores for staff and students.



No significant difference was found between staff and students with regard to the organisation of the event, $t(99) = -.997$, $p > 0.05$. However, a significant difference was found between staff and student perceptions of how well they got to know each other, $t(99) = -4.324$, $p < 0.001$ with staff displaying higher mean scores than the students. Staff indicated that the event had enabled them to get to know their students ($M=4.38$, $SD=0.87$), whereas students did not indicate that the event had enabled them to get to know the staff team to the same extent ($M=3.14$, $SD=0.98$). (See figure 1).

Qualitative analysis

Qualitative data from the second section of the questionnaire were analysed to identify: a) what worked well and b) how the event could be improved for subsequent years. The opportunity to get to know other students on the course and meeting new people was highlighted repeatedly by students as the best part of the day:

"The chance to meet fellow student and know that I had probably someone to sit next to next time I walked into a lecture room!"

"I had a good time. I've been able to relax and enjoy myself and meet lots of fun people. Thanks!"

The students found the activities fun and liked the fact that there was a wide range of tasks that could involve every group member. Working as part of a team and being able to interact with people that they didn't know was highlighted as a benefit of the event. Students also identified that the idea was 'original and a good ice breaker'

Several students commented that the event had eased their anxiety about starting their course, knowing that they're '*not on their own*' and would '*have someone to sit next to in their first lecture*':

"It was a really enjoyable event and put me at ease about starting my course."

Holding the event outside of the university environment was further identified as a positive aspect of the event.

"I like the fact that it was outdoors and it wasn't in the University so we could bond more in a different way, not like we would at the University."

Overall, students indicated that they enjoyed the event and comments regarding their least favourite part of the event were minor and can be easily addressed.

Students were also asked how they thought the event could be improved. Students recognised that not all staff members actively participated in the activities. It was suggested that all members of staff should join a group, even if they do not take part in the activities themselves. It was also suggested that staff members could rotate around the groups to enable them to get to meet more of their students.

The co-ordination of the activities was further highlighted as an area for improvement. Students felt that the activities could be planned so that groups did not have to constantly walk back and forth. Moving around the activities in a clockwise/anti-clockwise fashion was suggested as a solution to this.

Students identified that there was insufficient time at the end of the event for feedback. A longer plenary session may be appropriate to ensure that the end of the event does not appear rushed.

Staff feedback

The event was thoroughly enjoyed by staff members and comments were largely positive. The opportunity for students to get to know each other was highlighted as a key positive aspect of the day. It was also identified that the event provided a great opportunity for staff and students to interact and work as a team.

- Holding the event outside of the university was identified as a positive aspect of the event.
- The activities were regarded as challenging on a variety of levels and enabled each team member to take an active role.
- Staff recognised that, over the course of the day, students had bonded well together and had formed new friendships.
- The link between 'fun' and learning was also recognised:

"I've seen this type of activity used before, with patchy results, so it was great to see it done well and enthusiastically from all. It's tricky to consistently link 'fun' with learning. This is a really good example."

Staff were also asked to suggest ways that the event could be improved. The time and place of the event within induction week was highlighted as an area for improvement. It was felt that moving the event to the start of induction week may encourage more students to attend. Holding the event in the afternoon may also encourage attendance. However, it was also recognised that the placing of such an event may be subject to the timetabling of other key activities/central talks in induction week, e.g. ILS, registry services. It was identified that not all members of staff joined a group. This meant that not all students were given the opportunity to interact with staff – one of the key objectives of the day. It was suggested that all staff members should join a group, even if they do not want or feel able to participate.

Overall, staff members thoroughly enjoyed the event and suggested that this should become an annual event in induction week.

Conclusion

The induction process of university students has received increasing attention over the past two decades. This report describes an event held in induction week, designed to provide students with the opportunity to get to know each other and the members of the Psychology staff team in a more relaxed atmosphere outside of the university setting. The findings suggest that both staff and students enjoyed the event and found it a valuable experience. Students felt that it provided a good opportunity to get to know their peers and commented that the event had eased their anxiety about starting their course. Both staff and students highlighted areas for development which will be used to build upon the success of this year's induction programme.

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