

Transition into First Year Undergraduate Study

Students arrive at University with a wide range of educational backgrounds, very different life experiences and varying levels of preparation for their undergraduate studies. Whilst the majority of first year students are likely to have recently completed A level studies, there will also be those who are re-entering education as part of their own personal development, or perhaps as part of re-training for future employment. This diversity in the student intake will influence the nature and extent of students' engagement with higher education and can also contribute to a mismatch between students' expectations and the reality of their university experience.

The Higher Education Academy's *What Works? Retention and Success model* (Andrews, Clark & Thomas, 2012) puts student engagement and a sense of belonging at the heart of successful induction to university life; there is also a crucial link between these key factors and subsequent improvements in student retention and success.

This focus on successful induction embodies the promotion of early and continued engagement across the student lifecycle, nurturing positive student experiences through the academic, social and professional services, as well as helping to develop students' knowledge, confidence and individual identity as successful learners. Such a focus also develops the capacity of both students and university staff to engage in a true partnership approach, with supportive peer relationships and meaningful interactions between teaching staff and their students.

Student View

"When it turned out to be so different from what I expected, I assumed I was doing something wrong."

"I arrived believing I was more prepared than I actually was."

"It's all a real contrast with the way A Level is spoon-fed."

"I wanted to take up the help that's available but I don't have time."

"I don't know when to stop reading, or how deep to go."

"I needed to have people explain how tutorials work."

"I feel I can't allow myself a day off from studies, because I'll fall behind."

"I found academic reading very difficult: everyone is puzzled by it and confused."

All of the students participating in the focus group reported that University is very different from school. There is a huge anxiety about failing and there are concerns over: money issues, including the cost of books: feeling overloaded with information in Freshers' Week, some of which seems irrelevant to them at this time; not having time to read supporting information; not understanding how they are supposed to engage with lectures and tutorials; and not understanding how the virtual learning environment (VLE) works. Their suggestions of practice to assist with these anxieties include:

- Offer instruction on using the VLE in week zero.
- Spread induction information over the first two or three weeks rather than trying to cover everything in week zero and check to eliminate overlap of information across sessions.
- Offer face-to-face discussion about the difference between A level and University targeting key areas such as self-motivation; finding resources; managing email; knowing what to read and what to ignore, as well as when to stop reading; anxiety about failing; time management; essay writing.
- Use lecture capture to provide examples on the VLE of lectures and tutorials: clarify expectations of teaching formats.
- Facilitate subject area contact before arrival by using the VLE and pre-session materials.
- Offer early instruction on library searches for journals and electronic resources.
- Consider providing programme handbooks on USB sticks.
- Consider providing course packs of core reading to be purchased by students, rather than asking students to buy several books.

Those students that had been involved with peer mentoring / buddy schemes had found them useful particularly in the first few weeks of term; they valued face to face contact with personal tutors for early contact for help with pastoral issues but they would have liked to have been introduced to all academic staff to enhance their sense of belonging to the School; and the chance to meet other students before teaching started. In terms of information provision students would like some pre-session materials to plug the gap between A-level and university year one and they value checklists to help keep them on track.

In light of student feedback the **following recommendations** are suggested to enhance the support for students transitioning into university:

- Develop survival checklists for arrival and for the first two or three weeks.
- Offer early email contact with Personal Tutors – preferably before week zero – to catch pastoral issues.
- Ensure new students are introduced to all academic staff – even if don't teach level one – to enhance students' sense of belonging.
- Provide opportunities for new students to meet upper level students before teaching begins and consider using a peer mentoring / buddy scheme to assist for the first few weeks. The University has recently published a Peer Mentoring Model which can be found at:
http://ses.leeds.ac.uk/info/21800/student_support/1071/peer_mentoring.
- Ask current students to provide a 'Rough Guide' to the subject area - and to Leeds in general.
- Identify a member of staff who will have responsibility for overseeing all the transition points.

Case study: Examples from programmes in the Faculty of Biological Sciences

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- A Buddy is allocated in Induction Week.
- A second year mentor is then assigned in Week 3 to pick up questions that emerge once teaching begins.
- An optional transition support programme then starts in Week 3: a twilight session at 5pm on Mondays <http://www.fbs.leeds.ac.uk/transitions>.
- Peer mentoring is provided through the Peer Assisted Study Scheme (PASS).
- There is a dedicated Facebook page, managed by peer support mentors.
- The programme leader acts as an additional level of personal tutoring.
- Academic tutors are also Personal Tutors, so they see students frequently (this model won't work across all subject areas).
- Students are directed to Student Education Service Student Support team for help.

(Note: much of this is run at Faculty level)

Student Voice: Lifelong Learning Centre

“The amount I have learnt in the first year alone has been extraordinary, and I’m already using it within my work.” Alison Coulter

“I am now into my second semester and enjoying the experience. I am happy to be studying for my degree without hindering my sons care needs. I am thrilled for the opportunity to start accomplishing my ambitions at my age (56) because I thought I was past it! I believe mature students can enrich learning for younger peers in the group by sharing practical past life experiences.” Naseem Akram

“Everything was new to me from the modules, people, the portal, the library, the reading and I was still unsure if this course was for me. This uncertain feeling makes you feel unsettled. However, the support and guidance offered by the staff was invaluable and of course, this is what every fresher needs.” Haneen Shubib

“Initially the course was difficult as I had to get used to being back in full time education from a 6 year gap but the help from the tutors and support staff was fantastic and enabled me to succeed.” Matt Masters

“I have wanted to get back into education for many years, but worries and financial restraints have held me back. I know that, unlike the majority of students at the university, I was not ready to continue my education when I left school, but over the last decade I have become more settled and ready for the challenges of university. I could not recommend it highly enough. I honestly believe that coming to university was one of the best ‘life changing’ decisions I have ever made.” Simon Lambe

“A little nerve wrecking as the campus is very large and can be overwhelming at times, however, meeting lots of lovely people outweighed any of my worries.” Amina Afzal

“This has so far been the most challenging yet rewarding experience of my life!!!!!!”
Ray Whitaker

“I am only in my first year but already feel myself changing as a person. I feel that the more educated I become, the more my confidence is growing.” Pauline Butler

“I was, for a short while, under the impression that I didn’t belong at the university. I felt I was too old and didn’t have what it took to achieve the marks that were expected from me; that soon changed after a few lectures.” Rekha Sarbatta

“I was very nervous because I didn’t want let anyone down, I also doubted myself and felt that maybe I don’t belong here and I have taken someone else’s place up that deserves it more than me. However I have to say from the very outset, the staff here at Leeds made us all feel like we deserved to be here and that we will be successful, those initial fears soon disappeared.” John Fielding

Resources

University of Leeds Flying Start has been designed to help students understand what studying at university really means, it is full of advice from Leeds students and tips on effective studying.

<http://flyingstart.leeds.ac.uk/>

Skills@library provides academic skills teaching and e-learning support so that students can effectively find, use, apply and present the information they need. There are a range of resources for both staff and students.

http://library.leeds.ac.uk/skills#activate-tab1_for_staff

Help@Leeds provides guidance for new students including a link to the ‘Your Arrival’ Guide with checklists and preparatory information.

<http://help.leeds.ac.uk/>

University of Leeds Student Education Service (Student site) with advice and guidance

<http://students.leeds.ac.uk/#Academic-life>

Andrews J, Clark R & Thomas L (2012) The Higher Education Academy What Works? Compendium of effective practice in higher education retention and success. Aston University, Birmingham & HEA, York, UK.

Higher Education Academy (HEA) resources on the First Year Experience:

<https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/heav/first-year-experience>

Whittaker, R (2008) Quality Enhancement Themes: The First Year Experience – Transition to and during the first year, Quality Assurance Agency Scotland.

Yorke M & Longden B (2008) The first-year experience in higher education in the UK: HEA Final Report

https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/resources/detail/publications/fye_final_report#sthash.A5jzhaPV.dpuf