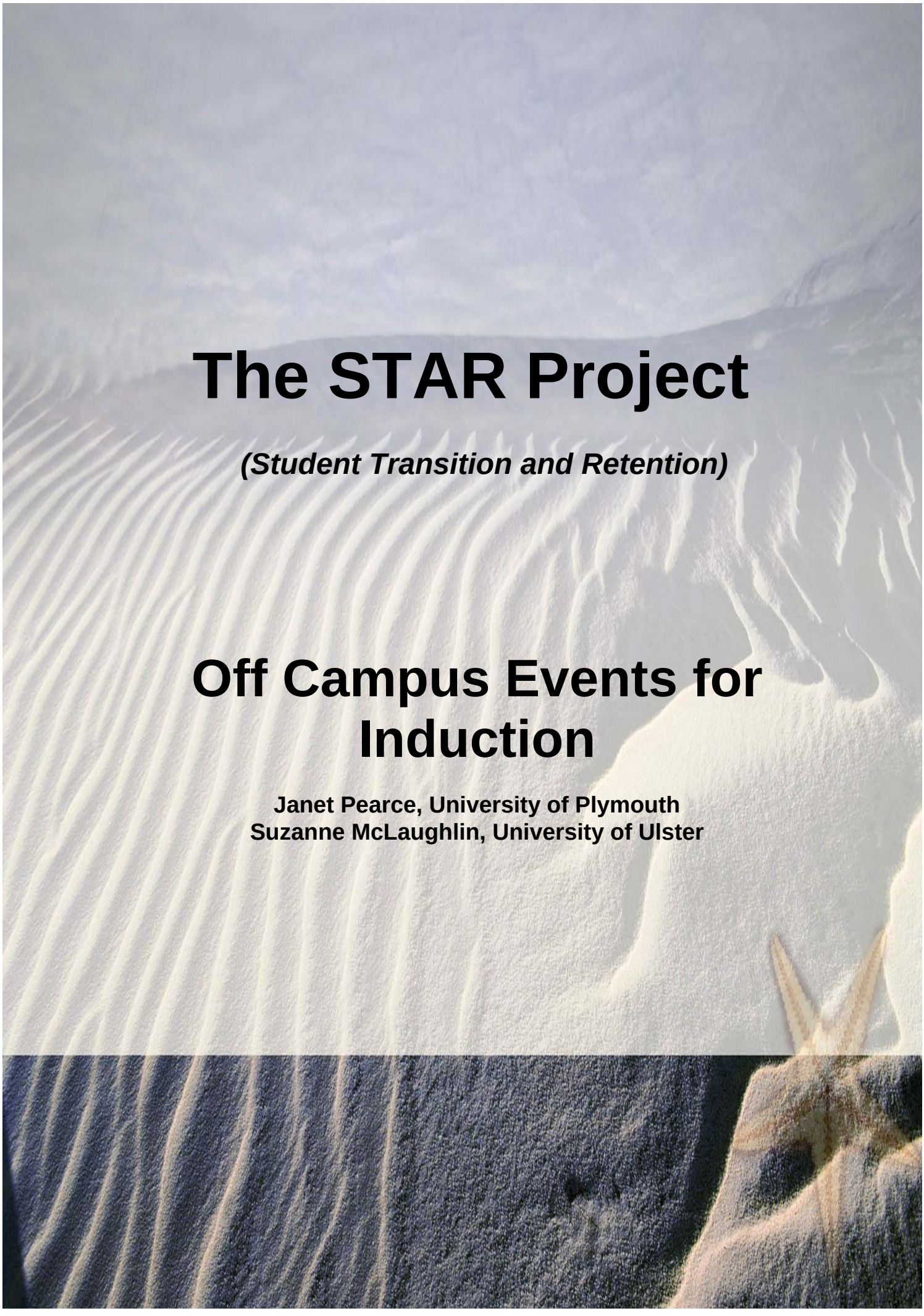

# The STAR Project

***(Student Transition and Retention)***

# Off Campus Events for Induction

**Janet Pearce, University of Plymouth**
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## SUMMARY

The School of Biological Sciences in Plymouth University runs a short off campus event which consists of a one day trip for students to get to know each other and the surrounding environment of Plymouth. Staff and students go on a short boat trip from Plymouth to the other side of the Tamar estuary so that staff and students can become acquainted with each other in a more informal environment than the university.

**Keywords:** induction, off-campus, socialise

## INTRODUCTION

Increasing importance is being placed on the management of students moving into higher education. As the types of students entering higher education change so the management of these students needs also to change. Modularisation has led to the development of large shared modules at level 1 as institutions benefit from economies of scale. In BioScience courses a first year class size might commonly be of 200 students compared with a secondary school class size of 20. Some students require help to deal both academically and socially with such changes in the scale of their learning environment.

Individuals vary considerably in their ability to socialise, especially when thrust into the strange surroundings of a new educational institution. An attempt to include social activities early in the course increases the extent to which a student is socially integrated into the academic community. This also leads to greater goal and institutional commitment, reducing the probability of dropping out (Grosset, 1991).

## RELEVANCE TO THE STAR GUIDELINES

At its outset the STAR project researched, produced and published a set of guidelines based on the causes of student attrition and which pointed the way towards possible good practice. The STAR guidelines relevant to this case study are 2.4 and 2.5.

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

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

Cook, *et al.* 2005

## THE PRACTICE

The School of Biological Sciences has been running a boat trip since about 1989 and prior to this they ran a coach outing. The practice did not arise out of a problem but was designed to get students to know each other. The initial resource implications consisted of the hiring of a coach, which then became the hiring of a boat.

Initial induction within the School of Biological Sciences lasts one week. Activities include meetings with programme coordinators and personal tutors, registration and introductory laboratory skills, meetings with welfare and other university services and a quiz. The quiz is run as a fun event, but it also covers some topics in basic biology. Feedback on their performance is given to personal tutors to discuss any deficiencies and potential improvements. The boat trip runs on the final day (Friday).

For the trip the students and staff meet at the university and walk down to a jetty in the Barbican area of Plymouth (approx a 10-15 min walk). They board the boat and travel across to the other side of the River Tamar, which is approximately a 20-30 minute trip. On the other side of the estuary the students walk to Mount Edgcumbe Country Park where there is a choice of activities. Those enrolled for Marine Biology separate and investigate the shoreline. Those enrolled for degrees in Biology are given a walking tour leaflet (see Appendix 1) and go for a tour around the park to look at their surroundings. The leaflet includes some biological notes which indicate features of interest as they walk around. The tour includes panoramic views of Plymouth. Approximately 25 % of the students go on the tour. For the students who prefer not to go on the tour there is a coffee bar and restaurant available where they can socialise. The students make their own way back to Plymouth on a local pedestrian ferry. Staff are normally available in the country park for between 3 and 4 hours.

The idea behind the practice is that staff and students can mingle in a casual atmosphere and students can reflect on the week's induction and ask any questions about things that still concern them. The students will have previously been working in groups during the week doing various laboratory-based practicals and this is a chance to get to know more of their classmates and staff before formal classes begin the following week.

The trip is very simple in its design and there is little staff effort in planning the trip other than hiring the boat and getting staff members to turn up. However, a small inexpensive trip such as this can help form social groups among the students and therefore help them integrate more quickly into the Higher Education environment.

## RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Last year (2004) there were 180 students and 9 staff on the trip. The trip across the river is paid for by the School and the return trip (£1.20) is paid for by the students themselves.

## EFFECTIVENESS

The trip is not evaluated in a formal way but the students are asked casually about their experience and what they thought of it. From those asked it seems that the trip is well liked. The students recognise the fact that it was organised for them and appreciate this.

**Staff and Student Opinions**

The general opinion of the staff seems to be that they enjoy the trip and the chance to talk to the students. They have been running induction field trips since 1989 and obviously enjoy them. Last year 9 staff went which worked out at approximately one staff member for every 20 students.

A focus group was held in Plymouth to collect student views. Of the 6 students present, only one did not go on the induction boat trip. Those that did had had a positive experience. Students who did not already know anyone thought that it was a good opportunity to meet new friends.

> *"…it did get me to meet other people"*
>
> *"this is where I met a group of five or six students which I got along really well with which was vitally important in that first week (when you are unsure if you made the right choice)…"*
>
> *"made friends with my housemate"*

Of those that had already made a friendship

> *"…it mainly involved getting to know people that I had already met better"*

For students who had already made some social contacts it may be a less rewarding experience. One student commented:

> *"I went around with my flat mate who I already knew"*

The student who was unable to attend due to a prior commitment that day did acknowledge the following:

> *"I would have liked to attend though, as it was a good opportunity to get more guidance, answer any questions still on your mind and to become acquainted with others from the course"*

## PROPOSED FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

If funding were available the staff would like to take the students on a residential trip to further promote group cohesion. They note that the marine biology students have always had good group dynamics, primarily because a diving course is included in

the curriculum. All the students meet at the diving and sailing centre and so get to know each other quite well.

Staff are also hoping to integrate some of the postgraduate induction programme, in particular to bring postgraduates on the boat trip to facilitate integration between them and the undergraduates.

## CONCLUSION

Induction is more than students receiving information about the course and getting to recognise a few academic faces. Induction is an important part of students establishing themselves rapidly in a new social context. It is in the interests of students and good working practices that student social groups form. This promotes communities of learning and initiates a group ethos that will be a valuable component of collaborative working throughout the course. Attempting to promote social cohesion with the distractions and anxieties of the first few days of a new course in a new institution is challenging. Removing a student group to an interesting and relaxing environment is an effective way of achieving both an element of relevant academic experience and promoting cohort cohesion.

## CONTEXT

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|---|---|
| **Institutional context** | • The University of Plymouth has an educational history dating back to 1862.<br>• In 2003/4 it had 15291 full time and 6115 part-time undergraduates. There are 936 academic staff |
| **Departmental context** | • Within the School of Biological Sciences there are approximately 315 Biology undergraduate students.<br>• 42% male 58% female, 68% 18-20yrs old, 4% >31 yrs old)<br>• A significant proportion of students now lives at home. From a survey of travel times, 90% live less than 30 minutes away with only 7% living more than 1hour away.<br>• Entry requirements vary from 280 points (BC at A level) for specialised degrees such as Marine Biology to 160 points (CC) for less specialised degrees such as Biological Sciences. About 80% of entrants are admitted on the basis of their A level (or Highers) qualifications.<br>• Of the 250 students admitted in 2002/3, 20 withdrew early (8%), and 22 (9%) failed academically.<br>• Overall the University of Plymouth's retention statistics are better than its HEFCE benchmark, particularly for mature students. |

## REFERENCES

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## FURTHER INFORMATION

Star Case Study: University of Ulster Residential Induction