



The STAR Project

(Student Transition and Retention)

Inducting and Retaining Non-Traditional Students

Adapted from: Maguire, S. (2001), Teaching Geography to Non-traditional Students: Inducting, nurturing and retaining them, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 25(2) 233-240.

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SUMMARY

The Department of Environmental and Biological Studies at Liverpool Hope University College recruits an above-average number of students who could be classified as 'non-traditional'. Many are mature and many have gained entry to higher education via routes other than A level. In addition, and increasingly, many have selected or been allocated to the first-year geography modules with little or no experience of geography education. These students undertake a carefully structured programme of small-group teaching, designed to induct and train them in the practices of higher education and through which they are introduced to key geographical concepts. This paper highlights some of the issues arising from teaching non-traditional students and identifies as case studies elements of the programme, which support the development of students' skills and geographical understanding.

INTRODUCTION

The Department of Environmental and Biological Studies at Liverpool Hope University College has always recruited an above average number of students who could be classified as 'non-traditional'. Many are mature and many have gained entry to higher education via routes other than A-level. A question asked by colleagues in other institutions is 'what do you do to keep these students on course?' Primarily, this is due to students undertaking a carefully structured programme of small-group teaching, designed to induct and train students in the practices of higher education and which also introduces them to key subject concepts which their previous education may have omitted.

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 2.3 and 3.2.

- 2.3** Induction activities should support the development of those independent study habits suitable for Higher Education.
- 3.2** The course and its delivery should assist students' transition from their previous educational experience to studying at tertiary level as well as

addressing the different needs arising from the subject backgrounds of the student cohort.

Cook, *et al.* 2005

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

The intake of geography students at Liverpool Hope University College in 1997 consisted of 145 students with a mean age of 21 years. The cohort consisted of 60% female and 40% male students compared to gender divides in the whole geography sector of 44% female and 56% male for humanities programmes and 29% female and 71% male for physical science programmes (HESA, 1996). 87% of the students had entered by the traditional A-level route with the remainder possessing BTec or Access qualifications. Over half of the 'traditional' student intake (63%) had the equivalent of, or less than, three Grade Ds at A-level (12 points). The mean scores, obtained from the University and Colleges Admissions Service for the U.K. statistical reports, for geography undergraduates accepted to degree courses in 1997 were 21.2 for courses classified as geography (physical science) and 19.1 for those termed geography (Social studies).

Out of the Liverpool Hope student group, one-half were the first member of their immediate family to enter higher education and a further 16% had only one other family member who had experience of higher education. These figures appear to demonstrate relatively high levels of inexperience of higher education within an U.K. context. These summary statistics for this typical year's intake demonstrate that departmental tutors cannot assume that they are teaching 'traditional' geography students. However, data presented by Dyas & Fox (1996) for the graduating geography class of 1996, at Liverpool Hope, demonstrated that 94% of students obtained a lower second class honours degree or above compared with a national U.K average of 96%. In addition, 66% of all graduates were in employment six months after graduation and 27% were pursuing further study compared with U.K. figures of 62% and 19% respectively (Speake, 1999). It can be inferred that the programme of study on offer not only accommodates these students but also provides them with a learning environment in which they can flourish. This claim can be supported by the external teaching quality assessment process:

"There are many positive features of the provision which include: ...a strongly supportive learning environment. ..The courses assessed achieve a high level of added value. "

(Quality Assurance Agency, 1995, p1)

THE PRACTICE

Inducting, Nurturing and Retaining Students

The students enter Liverpool Hope University College to study for either a B.A (Hons) or B.Sc (Hons) in Combined Studies, with geography being one of three subjects studied at first-year level. All students, whether or not they are aiming to continue

with geography after Level 1, study the same geography programme consisting of lectures, practicals, seminars and fieldwork. The seminar programme has been specifically designed to induct and support students new to higher education (Appendix 1). Although this programme had existed in the department for a number of years, in 1996 it was recognised with a Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning grant awarded by HEFCE/ DENI to develop the programme further and to disseminate it nationally (Dyas & Bradley 1999).

The programme of seminars was designed to induct students into the practices of higher education paying particular attention to 'critical incidents', i.e. events that might cause non-traditional students concern such as essay and oral presentation assignments and to remedy specific gaps in knowledge. The following principles underpin the seminar programme:

1. Establish communication –Tinto's theory of student integration states that both academic and social integration are required for students to succeed (Tinto, 1987). In order to address this at Liverpool Hope weekly meetings of geography students are held in seminar groups of 12 – 15. These provide a forum for the establishment of networks both for social and study purposes.
2. Student tracking. The regular contact with a tutor also provides opportunities for pastoral support and an awareness of each student's progress. The institution requires student attendance to be monitored closely and seminar tutors maintain records for each session. It is therefore easy for tutors to identify students at risk of failure due to non-attendance and to instigate meetings to discuss attendance and any underlying problems.
3. Assess early and feedback quickly. The seminar programme is assessed using a portfolio in which students submit tasks on a weekly basis. These are marked and returned with formative comments the following week. Students have the opportunity then to improve the task prior to its final submission for summative assessment as part of the complete portfolio. This benefits students by enabling them to gauge at an early stage the expectations and standards required by the Department and to provide both themselves and the tutors with feedback on the quality of learning taking place (Biggs, 1999, p142). It also prevents students slipping into a mode of study where they do little until major assignments are due to be submitted. This process, although time-consuming for tutors, also provides them with diagnostic information about each student's capabilities. Students can be directed at an early stage for supportive advice on aspects of writing and other basic skills.
4. Critical incidents. Early stages of the seminar programme are themed around critical incidents so the first sessions are planned to enable students to meet each other and to become comfortable as a group. These are followed by sessions on use of libraries, note taking in lectures and essay writing.

Plugging the knowledge gaps. Students demonstrated a lack of confidence in their prior knowledge of geography (Maguire et al., 2001). For some this reflects the number of years since they studied the subject formally, or their low levels of achievement previously. In order for these students to remedy these deficiencies and

to feel confident in their ability to succeed in the subject, the second semester seminar programme focuses on the critical discussion of geographical topics.

CONCLUSIONS

Liverpool Hope University College has demonstrated its ability to recruit 'non-traditional' students. Geography tutors within the institution have developed a framework of pedagogic support enhancing students' ability to become integrated both socially and academically. This approach to inducting and nurturing students has proved successful in integrating and retaining these students within the geography programme. With many institutions currently focussed on widening access and participation a teaching approach, which supports students through close contact, formative assessment, monitoring, skills' development and the reinforcement of a sound subject-knowledge base, can be recommended for first-year undergraduates of this 'non-traditional' make-up in any discipline.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/> - The Higher Education Funding Council for England,
Widening Participation

<http://www.bioscience.heacademy.ac.uk/issues/wp/index.htm> - The Higher Education
Academy, Centre for Bioscience, Widening Participation

APPENDIX 1

Liverpool Hope Year 1 Seminar Programme.

Week	Semester One	Semester Two
1	Icebreaker	Geographical Inequalities
2	Note taking/Reading — economic geography	Gender Issues
3	Literature searching—linked to human geography essay	Population Dynamics
4	Referencing—linked to human geography essay	Resource Management: Housing
5	Essay writing—linked to human geography essay	Geography of Crime
6	Role play—mining	Ethics in Geography
7	Individual essay planning feedback	What is geography?
8	Presentation organisation— physical geography theme Submit Essay	River processes
9	Student preparation of presentations	Fieldwork Issues Submit portfolio 2
10	Paired presentations— physical geography theme	Fieldwork
11	Paired presentations— physical geography theme	Revision and exam techniques
12	Presentation and essay feedback Submit portfolio 1	Return of portfolio 2: feedback and evaluation