

The background of the cover is a photograph of sand dunes. The top half shows a wide, gentle dune under a clear sky. The middle section features a close-up of the dune's surface, showing fine, parallel ridges and troughs. In the bottom right corner, a starfish is partially visible, its arms extending towards the center. The bottom half of the image is a darker, more textured view of the sand dunes, possibly from a different angle or lighting.

The STAR Project

(Student Transition and Retention)

Pre - Entry Guidance

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SUMMARY

This project offers impartial pre-entry community based guidance to adults considering entry to Higher Education. The project worker is based at University College Worcester and has a brief to deliver individual guidance and group information sessions to targeted groups of adults across Herefordshire and Worcestershire. In addition, the project worker represents the pre-entry needs of adults within the host institution by close liaison with departments such as Widening Participation and Admissions as well as the Student Achievement Officer.

Keywords: student advice, pre-entry guidance, university entrance.

INTRODUCTION

It has been noted (Johnston 2000, McGivney 1996, National Audit Office 2002) that contributory factors in respect of early withdrawal rates include such issues as lack of information about what the course will involve, financial pressures, and social factors, e.g. isolation. This project targets groups of people aged 19 or over who may have barriers to learning, and/or who may not be able to readily access the information and support services already available through the university through the admissions office, Open Days, the website, etc. This group includes those with social or attitudinal barriers such as lack of confidence or lack of support, as well as those with more tangible barriers, such as distance, care commitments, disability, or financial issues.

To ensure that that the service is as accessible and user friendly as possible, the guidance is delivered within the community, with the guidance worker acting as a link between the community and the world of Higher Education. Currently one guidance worker covers the counties of Herefordshire and Worcestershire.

RELEVANCE TO 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 1.1 and 1.3.

- 1.1 Information about campuses and courses should be accurate and lead to realistic student expectations.
- 1.3 Support should be available prior to study particularly where problems of transition may be predictable.

Cook, *et al.* 2005

THE PRACTICE

The guidance and information offered aimed to make people more aware about how the Higher Education experience might affect them, thus reducing the incompatibility between expectation and actual experience. The remit of the project was twofold, and comprised both outreach and in-reach. The outreach element was seen as guidance in the community, whereas the inreach element fed back to the institution the needs and perceived barriers of the target groups. This provided the institution with the opportunity to assess the impact of these perceived barriers on its own procedures and practices as they apply to incoming students and those progressing through their courses of study.

The Guidance Project

Contact was made with people in the following ways:

1. Referrals

Relevant Higher Education related referrals are taken from a wide range of groups, e.g. the IAG (Information, Advice and guidance) network, community groups, mental health and disability groups, women's groups, colleges and community centres. Wherever possible, clients are seen in their own community, and venues range from village halls and employers premises, to drop-in centres and cafes.

Care is taken to market and publicise the guidance service in as wide a range of ways as possible to disadvantaged groups, such as by working with specific geographical areas, or key personnel such as CAB (Citizen's Advice Bureaux), Surestart, Job Centres, etc.

2. Maintaining a community presence

Using this approach, the guidance worker identified and contacted the target groups directly, and not as the result of a referral by an existing group. A new, visible and well-publicised guidance presence was established in the target communities, in order to generate interest in learning and career choices.

In several cases this took the form of establishing guidance 'clinic', with the guidance worker taking drop-in queries or booked appointments at a local venue on a regular basis. In one case, a community centre was used, and in another case, a youth café on a high street was booked. Publicity was extensive but targeted, using not just traditional forms of advertising, such as posters and newspaper articles, but also door-to-door leaflet drops, letters sent to parents via school children and numerous contacts with key workers such as health visitors, housing officers, etc.

In other cases, 'guidance clinics' were set up within other established communities, such as mental health support groups, a women's centre and playgroups. In each case, guidance was offered on the premises, on a regular basis, either by drop in or booked appointments.

3. Working with existing learners

The guidance worker also worked with people who had already embarked on a learning path, from community and leisure courses, to access courses. This generally involved speaking to groups of learners in class and, from this, taking booked appointments, usually at the college or centre involved.

The Nature of Pre-Entry Guidance

Some of the people seen were ready to progress directly on to Higher Education, whereas others needed to undertake some other course of study beforehand. The guidance and information offered was seen as a process whereby the decision making may take a period of some weeks or months, and so many people accessed the service on several occasions. In many cases, the guidance worker acted as a link between the individual and the University, for example by obtaining information for them, facilitating contacts with other people, offering tours around the campus, etc. Some people needed some initial support on their entry to the University and the guidance worker would maintain contact, to ease the student into the institution.

Work within the Institution

The guidance worker has been seen not only as a link between individuals and the University, but also as representing the pre-entry needs of adults to impact on institutional procedures and practices. As well as linking with departments such as Widening Participation, Admissions and Marketing, she has an integral position within Student Services, representing the pre-entry stage of the student life cycle. She works closely with both the Student Achievement Officer and the Careers Department thus facilitating cross communication and information exchange.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

In 2002 a co-financing bid was put in to Hereford and Worcestershire Learning Skills Council (LSC) and the HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) regional widening participation project. LSC committed £21,000 per annum for a total of three years, with the HEFCE project committing £21,000 for one year.

Targets were drawn up, and the project worker was appointed in May 2002. She is based at University College Worcester within the Student Services Department, reporting to a steering group of interested parties, including LSC, the Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) Network, local colleges, and community groups, as well as internal personnel.

As the project entered the second year and the HEFCE funding came to an end, University College Worcester made a commitment to continue to fund the post. It is hoped that once the LSC funding has finished, the university will fund the role full time and permanently.

EFFECTIVENESS

The effectiveness of the project has been measured by the following criteria:

1. Numbers using the service
2. User feedback
3. Numbers progressing to Higher Education

1. Numbers using the service

Targets were established at the beginning of the project to monitor numbers of clients seen for guidance, and for information, as well as the numbers of visits to community groups and employers. In all cases, these were met or exceeded. In the first year, a total of 192 people were seen, with 43 visits to community or learner groups.

It should, however, be noted that a numerical analysis alone does not give a true reflection of the work carried out, as one guidance interview alone can take many hours work in terms of initial contact, travel and room arrangements and follow up. Some of the clients seen were very vulnerable and needed extra time and support in the initial stages.

2. User feedback survey

Client feedback: All clients who received guidance were sent an evaluation form to ascertain their satisfaction with the service. All clients indicated a high level of satisfaction and stated that the guidance received had helped them to progress. Typical comments included:

"I found the guidance worker very helpful. She listened carefully to my needs and offered help accordingly."

"The guidance worker has been great, and her showing me the ropes immediately prior to commencement was very helpful."

Community Group feedback: A similar questionnaire was also sent to all community groups and learning providers in the region. Again responses were all positive, universally indicating that they found the service accessible and useful for their clients, for example:

"Positive impact, confidence building to have a proper contact at UCW who is constantly available and able to get information."

3. Numbers progressing to Higher Education

At the end of the first year of the project (March 2003) six people had actually started a Higher Education course, with a further 24 who had applications pending.

Thus, it can be seen that from the start, community groups and their users have found it very useful to have a guidance worker in their midst, offering Higher Education information and guidance in an accessible way. Service users have indicated that the help has raised their awareness of Higher Education and helped them make more informed choices about which courses to take.

It is worth noting that due to the nature of the client group, with many undertaking some preparatory study prior to entry to Higher Education, the full impact of the project in terms of numbers will not be felt for several years.

The true impact of this project will be seen when further evaluation is conducted relating to the effect the information and guidance received has had on an individual's 'preparedness' for Higher Education, thus maximizing their experiences when they have engaged with a course, and reducing their likelihood to drop out. This can only be evaluated over a period of time, as those who have received the guidance progress through the system at varying paces.

PROPOSED FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

1. The initial concern of the project is to secure long term funding after March 2005 when the LSC funding runs out. It is hoped that the number of guidance workers can be increased so that the work can be extended within the community. In addition, it is hoped that pre-entry guidance can be offered to under 19 year olds through Aimhigher. (<http://www.AimHigher.ac.uk>)
2. Clients seen throughout the project will be tracked, and in the longer term, an evaluation will be carried out looking at the impact of the guidance offered.

REFERENCES

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McGivney 1996, *Staying or leaving the course*. NIACE,.Leicester

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FURTHER INFORMATION

Star Case Study: Pre - Helping Learners Make SMART Decisions

<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

<http://www.thinkuni.info/> - Providing Solutions to your questions about higher education