

The background of the slide is a photograph of sand dunes. The top half shows a wide, flat expanse of sand with fine, parallel ripples. The bottom half shows a more textured, darker sand surface with a starfish in the lower right corner. The text is centered over the lighter, upper portion of the image.

# **The STAR Project**

*(Student Transition and Retention)*

## **Providing Quality Information Prior to Entry**

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## SUMMARY

The Department of Biology at the University of York distributes a leaflet in response to enquiries and to all applicants. It gives a comprehensive account of the courses on offer and, to a lesser extent, the teaching to be expected. It is essentially factual and substantially free of hyperbolic adjectives. Although the students viewed it as generally accurate, they did find some aspects of their early experience surprising. On the whole, the leaflet does not create the false expectations of the institution or course which characterise early leavers. It is, in our view, a good example of its type and provides a model which can be followed.

**Keywords:** retention, recruitment, school leaver information, decision-making.

## INTRODUCTION

Student retention is a multidimensional problem. As a consequence it has no simple solution. It is possible, however, to identify some of the common reasons for students leaving their courses. These reasons fall into two groups: those that are present before entry and of which the student was unaware; and those that arise after entry and are, therefore, unpredictable. Much research points to the former to be the most important for the traditional school leaver. Yorke (1997) summarises the reasons students leave as:

- incompatibility between the student and their course and institution;
- lack of preparation for the HE experience;
- lack of commitment to the course;
- financial hardship; and
- poor academic progress.

Of these five it is arguable that at least the first two and probably the third have their roots in events which start prior to entry and are related to a student's choice of course and/or institution.

Most students coming to University are apprehensive but after a few months these fears are greatly diminished (Lowe and Cook, 2003). For some, however, the University experience is so different from what they expected that they leave. Most students leave very early in their course and most leave either because they feel the course is unsuitable or to join another HE course.

Institutions are not entirely responsible for the expectations of students. To the extent that they are, however, they should ensure that the information passing between themselves and their prospective students is as representative of the actual student experience as possible. There are many ways of achieving this and the one discussed below is the use of literature generated by a group of courses and made available to all who apply.

## 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 guideline relevant to this case study is 1.1.

- 1.1 Information about campuses and courses should be accurate and lead to realistic student expectations.

Cook, *et al.* 2005

## THE PRACTICE

Until 8 years ago, individual leaflets were produced for each of the courses offered by the Department of Biology at the University of York. Leaflets were also produced for some sub-categories of applicants, e.g. mature students. These individual leaflets were then consolidated into a single document that is kept up to date and given to anyone who asks for more information than is in the prospectus. It goes automatically to anyone who is made an offer. The leaflet therefore provides some of the information on which applicants make their final choices. It also informs potential students of the sorts of experiences they are likely to have should they be successful in their application to York.

In 2003 the booklet consisted of 28 A4 pages stapled together with a coloured cover. It is being supplemented by a web version in 2004/5 at:  
<http://www.york.ac.uk/depts/biol/ugrad/admissio/biolhome.htm> (accessed 16-11-04).

The hard-copy booklet contains the following sections

<b>Biology at York:</b>	Outlines the purpose of the booklet
<b>Why Biology?:</b>	Outlines the relevance of biology and its inherent interest.
<b>Why York?:</b>	This is essentially a list of the very positive attractions York offers students.
<b>Courses at York:</b>	A list of the courses within the department (see appendix 1)

<b>Course structures:</b>	This is a list of the modules from which the various courses are constructed with some indication of the course composition including potential research projects.
<b>Courses:</b>	Each course (genetics, molecular cell biology, ecology, 4-year sandwich courses) is outlined at a modular level.
<b>Teaching &amp; Learning:</b>	A description of the teaching methods employed.
<b>Assessment &amp; your degree:</b>	A very short section on how the final degree mark is derived. There is some detail on the emphasis of the assessment in the final year.
<b>Teaching Quality:</b>	Quality processes are described here. Emphasis is placed on the student voice.
<b>Help!:</b>	The advising system and help for students with special needs.
<b>Careers:</b>	An outline of how the University will help a student find a suitable career in terms of formal seminars etc. Details are given of the employment statistics for recent graduates as well as a list of the employers for whom they are working.
<b>Research at York:</b>	An outline of the research breadth at York and indicators of quality - RAE scores, research institutes and companies based at York.
<b>Application &amp; Selection:</b>	An explanation of the admissions process at York and what an applicant can expect to receive and when.
<b>Keeping in touch:</b>	The KIT (Keeping In Touch) scheme: current students are linked to applicants so that potential students can ask questions of current students.
<b>Disabilities:</b>	Arrangements to be made for students with declared disabilities.
<b>Studying as a Mature Student:</b>	A series of frequently asked questions answered.

## EFFECTIVENESS

Is the booklet effective in what it seeks to do? The staff believe so. Many leaflets have now been consolidated into one which is relatively easy to edit year by year and to distribute. It is useful and comprehensive and gives, from an academic viewpoint, a balanced view of life at York as a student.

The staff view of the booklet is as follows:

*“It is an efficient way of giving further information to people who are thinking of coming here. It fleshes out what was said in the prospectus and brings together careers information..... If anyone enquires about a course we can slap one of these in an envelope, write a covering letter and send it off. It is designed to give prospective students the information they need to make the right decision.”*

*“Over the last ten years or so we have had very few applicants who stand very little chance of being offered a place. For instance, those who are doing the wrong A levels or who are going to get grades well below what we ask for. So we have lost applicants we used to get which is good for them because they would be wasting their time and it is good for us because we would be wasting our time. That may be part of focusing their minds on what is expected of them and what a student can expect if they come here.”*

When students were interviewed the predominant view was that the course information booklet was useful and comprehensive. Most students in the group had read it thoroughly, had been influenced positively by it and felt that it had prepared them well.

When students were asked if there had been any surprises, few made any negative comments and the following reflects a typical attitude:

*“Surprises! not really- I had a good idea what to expect from the open day and the prospectus.”*

Where comments were made the unexpected elements cited were:

### **Staff attitudes**

*“The relaxed and informal attitude of the staff.”*

*“Interaction with the lecturers was not expected. They are very friendly, informal and there is a social atmosphere within the department (a good thing!!).”*

The leaflet should have helped applicants a little here. It has a friendly informal style which is directly addressed to the reader. First names are given throughout.

## **Teaching methods**

*“Tutorials – I never had to talk or contribute to a group discussion before and found that difficult to get used to.”*

Although there is a small section on teaching methods in the leaflet, clearly it does not adequately inform all students. (See appendix 2)

## **Contact time**

Students commented on the contact time in year 1.

*“The lengths of the practicals and overall timetable surprised me. The number of hours a week was more than my ‘A’ levels .... And there were no breaks for some people (9.15 to 6:15).”*

*“The timetable being so packed. I thought that we would have quite a few hours, but was surprised by the number there actually were.”*

*“The work load was quite high. I think in the first few weeks we actually had more lecture time than we had in sixth form.”*

*“Biology would have dramatically more hours per week than the majority of other subjects. The amount of interaction and time the academic staff were prepared to give from the outset.”*

There is no indication of contact time in the booklet but there is an emphasis on tutorial work. It is an arguable point whether students need to know this sort of detail before they arrive. Some who might choose an institution for its social rather than academic reputation would clearly be deterred by knowledge of lengthy contact time and workload. On the other hand being forewarned of a heavy workload in year 1 could help students make a better informed choice.

## **PROPOSED FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS**

This leaflet is reprinted every year and, therefore, up-dated annually. It has evolved with the courses over the years and no radical changes to the leaflet are planned. It is now available on the internet.

## **CONTEXT**

### **The Importance of Accurate Information**

The importance of getting accurate information to student prior to entry is emphasised by the times at which many students leave University. Every student who voluntarily leaves the University of Ulster is requested to complete a withdrawal form on which the reasons for leaving are stated. About half the students who leave complete this form. The date on which the form is completed is also given. For the year 2000/2001 the reasons given for leaving and the dates on the forms were classified as follows:

Reason given	Percentage of students giving the reason				
	Nov	Jan	Mar	May	Jul
Health	2	0	1	0	0
Financial	2	0	1	0	0
Personal	18	7	2	2	3
Course unsuitable	8	10	2	2	2
To go elsewhere	11	6	10	4	5
Total	41	23	17	9	11

It is clear that students leave rapidly (64% of those who leave had left by January). The predominant reasons given are personal (32%, mostly by January). Personal reasons probably equate to an unwillingness to discuss the true reasons. Taken together “Course unsuitable” and “To go elsewhere” probably equate to an expression of disappointment in the course or institution. This accounts for 60% of the leavers. Many of these students leave before they have had the opportunity to fail and this indicates dissatisfaction with their early experience. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that this pattern of leaving is replicated elsewhere.

### The University of York

The leaflet discussed here is sent to all applicants offered a place and to anyone else who enquires. It is, therefore, aimed at those who are already interested in Biology at York. It has been developed over many years and factual.

<b>Institutional context</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 9277 FTE Students</li> <li>• 23 Departments</li> <li>• Collegiate System</li> </ul>
<b>Dept context Biology Dept</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Course title:</b> Biology single subject degrees, e.g. Biology, Genetics.</li> <li>• <b>Size of intake:</b> 103 (2002-3)</li> <li>• <b>% mature:</b> “very few – 1 or 2 per year”</li> <li>• <b>% living at home:</b> “Practically none. We get very few applications from the York area. Even local students like to live on campus. A lot of students would rather live on campus”</li> <li>• <b>Intake requirements:</b> ABB to BBB including BB in Biology and Chemistry</li> <li>• <b>Average on intake:</b> 354 points (equates approximately to AAB) 89% offered A level or highs in fulfilment of the entry requirements</li> <li>• <b>Early leavers:</b> In 2003 there were 6 early leavers, 4 of whom left immediately after registration; 4 changed course within York. A further 2 students transferred into the courses.</li> </ul>

## **CONCLUSION**

Students require accurate information in order to make informed decisions about their future. Attracting students unsuited to the institution or course is probably counterproductive both for the prospective student and for the staff of the department concerned. It is thus important that departmental literature conveys an accurate and realistic picture of the course and student life. This leaflet from York has the confidence of staff and the trust of students. Although there are many other attributes of the University of York and its students which contribute to high retention rates, the simplicity, informality and directness of this type of literature may also contribute.

## **REFERENCES**

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## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

STAR Case Study: Visit Days

<http://www.universityoptions.co.uk/> - Information for those applying to HE institutions

<http://www.aimhigher.ac.uk> - Information on HE

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

## APPENDIX 1

Examples from the 2003/4 booklet. There were 28 pages and it is not appropriate to reproduce them in their entirety. However, a small selection gives a flavour of the content and style.

These sample pages show that the presentation is simple and factual. There is no overuse of hyperbolic adjectives which can be common in some advertising literature.

Aspects of the course provision which are thought to be attractive or beneficial are repeated (e.g. changing courses in year 1).

### Biological Courses at York

We offer courses within the Department of Biology. In most cases these are available as:

- Standard 3-year course leading to a BSc (Honours) degree.
- 4-year course with a 'sandwich' year working in a commercial or government research laboratory
- 4-year course with a sandwich year as a student at a University in France or Germany.

	3-years	4-years with a year in research lab	4-years with a year in France or Germany
Biology	C100	C107	C101
Genetics	C400	C404	C401
Molecular Cell Biology	C130	C134	C131
Ecology Conservation & Environment	C910		C911
Biochemistry	C700	C705	C701
Biology/ Education	C1X3		

Biochemistry and Biology/ Education are run jointly by the Department of Biology and the Departments of Chemistry and Education.

#### CHANGING COURSES

Because the First year Modules are common to all students (except those taking Biochemistry), you can change from one 3-year degree course to another freely within the first year (and, with some constraints, even later). Changing from a 3-year to a 4-year course is also often possible.

## Course Structure

All courses at York are modular, giving you a choice in building up a course that matches your particular interests. It is also possible to take modules in other Departments, depending on timetable compatibility. Biology students most commonly opt for modules in the Environmental and Psychology Departments.

### FIRST YEAR

In your first year you will study modules in all areas of Biology, from molecular biology through to ecology and animal behaviour. This provides a strong basis for later specialisation, and introduces you to aspects of Biology you may not have been aware of before coming. Because the first year modules are common to all students (except biochemists), it is possible to change between our different specialist degree courses during this time.

These are the current First Year modules:-

Term 1	Term 2	Term 3
Molecules to cells	Energy in cells	Cell signalling and development
Genetics	Evolution, diversity and adaptation	Plant physiology and diversity
Ecology I	Pure and applied microbiology	Ecology II
Scientific and transferable skills	Scientific and transferable skills	Scientific and transferable skills

The Scientific and transferable skills Modules include weekly tutorials in which you will learn to research, prepare and present information, as well as analytical and statistical skills, experimental design and IT and computer related skills.

## **Marine Biology Field Course**

At the end of your first year. You will have the chance to attend a 10-day Marine Biology Field Course at the University Marine Biological Station, Millport. The Marine Station is on an island off the West Coast of Scotland, and is well equipped, with a student hostel as well as laboratories, an aquarium, and two sea going research vessels. You would spend your time working on the sea shore, dredging the sea bed, looking at live plankton, and carrying out your own project, usually in a small group. Not to mention cycling round the island, the barbecues, and all of the other things that go on during a Marine Field Course.

**Remember THE COMMON FIRST YEAR MEANS THAT YOU CAN CHANGE COURSE EASILY DURING THIS TIME**

## APPENDIX 2

The only area in which students expressed some surprise was in the teaching and learning methods. More specifically they were surprised at the extent of staff contact time and at the use of the tutorial system (which is extensive at York).

This extract is the information given in the booklet about the teaching methods.

### Teaching and Learning

Teaching is by a combination of different methods.

Lectures in the first year usually involve the whole class; in the Second and Final years the numbers are lower, depending on how many people have chosen the module in question. A lecture is intended to stimulate your interest in a topic, and to discuss what the lecturer sees as the key ideas and issues in that topic. You need to make your own notes as you go along, and to follow up the lecture with your own reading.

Practical classes take place in the teaching Laboratories, and in the First year may involve the whole class, or the class may be split between several sessions. Again, in the Second year the numbers are smaller. We don't hold practical classes in the final year, because you will be fully involved with the practical aspects of your research project.

Tutorials are a key feature of your course. Throughout your first two years, you would meet weekly for an hour or so, in a group of 4 with a tutor. Apart from your very first term, you choose your own tutor each term. You can therefore extend your understanding of a particular area of biology that you are particularly interested in. Tutorial work can involve discussing biological problems, preparing and presenting work to the rest of the group, essay writing and a variety of other activities.

Other forms of teaching and learning at various times through your course include Seminars, Workshops, Group Tasks, and the preparation of Poster Displays

## ASSESSMENT AND YOUR DEGREE

Because the course is modular, assessment takes place at the end of each module. The marks for your 12 first year modules do not count towards your final degree. Second year modules have a lower weighting than final year ones: together they account for 52% of your degree. Your final year research project adds 24% and the remainder is made up of an Open Essay in the last term of your Final Year, and the three Finals exams which are designed to assess your synthetic, analytical and problem solving skills rather than particular coursework.

If you take one of our 4-year courses, the 'sandwich' year contributes 10%, and the other contributions to your degree are reduced accordingly.