



# The STAR Project

*(Student Transition and Retention)*

**Helping learners make  
SMART decisions**

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# Helping Learners Make SMART Decisions

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## SUMMARY

Workshop sessions are organised in further and higher education institutions with the intention of informing potential students about the nature of Higher Education and improving their decision-making skills. Trained facilitators, who use a range of tools produced centrally, lead the sessions. These tools consist of icebreakers, information resources (e.g. qualification frameworks) and case studies based around the histories of non-traditional students with whom potential applicants might identify. Student feedback indicates appreciation of the clarity that this brings to their decisions about attending Higher Education.

**Keywords:** non-traditional students, decision-making, student retention, West of Scotland Wider Access Forum.

## INTRODUCTION

The Decision Making and Student Progression in Transition Project is supported by the West of Scotland Wider Access Forum (WoSWAF) as part of their on-going work to increase participation rates and improve student experience. The Forum membership consists of all Further and Higher Education providers in the area. The project was planned to run as a pilot for 18 months from January 2004 to July 2005. In the initial stages of the project it was decided to devise a shorter working title for the activities and so the **udecide** name was adopted. The project intends to address ways in which students can be helped in their decision-making process relating to progression and transition from Further Education to Higher Education.

## 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 1.1 and 1.2.

- 1.1 Information about campuses and courses should be accurate and lead to realistic student expectations.
- 1.2 Teachers, careers advisors, family members and other educational institutions are important clients of the institution and should receive up-to-date, accurate and relevant information. Two-way communication should be promoted.

Cook, *et al.* 2005

# THE PRACTICE

## Outline

The project aims to develop a programme to assist students to make appropriate educational decisions at key points in their lives. The project is developing a set of materials and workshops that will complement existing guidance mechanisms within institutions. The materials offer general assistance in the decision-making process and focus on seven key areas:

1. Level of entry;
2. Part-time and full time study;
3. Level of preparedness;
4. Implications of 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> year entry;
5. Change of regime (e.g. Further Education Colleges to Higher Education Institutions);
6. Implications of first or second choice of programme and the importance of choosing the right programme; and
7. Financial implications of choice.

The workshops are being offered as part of on-going guidance or at special events such as Open and Information Days so that students can find out which aspects they will need to consider when making decisions about progression and transition. Students will then have a basis for asking appropriate questions of admission staff at a later date.

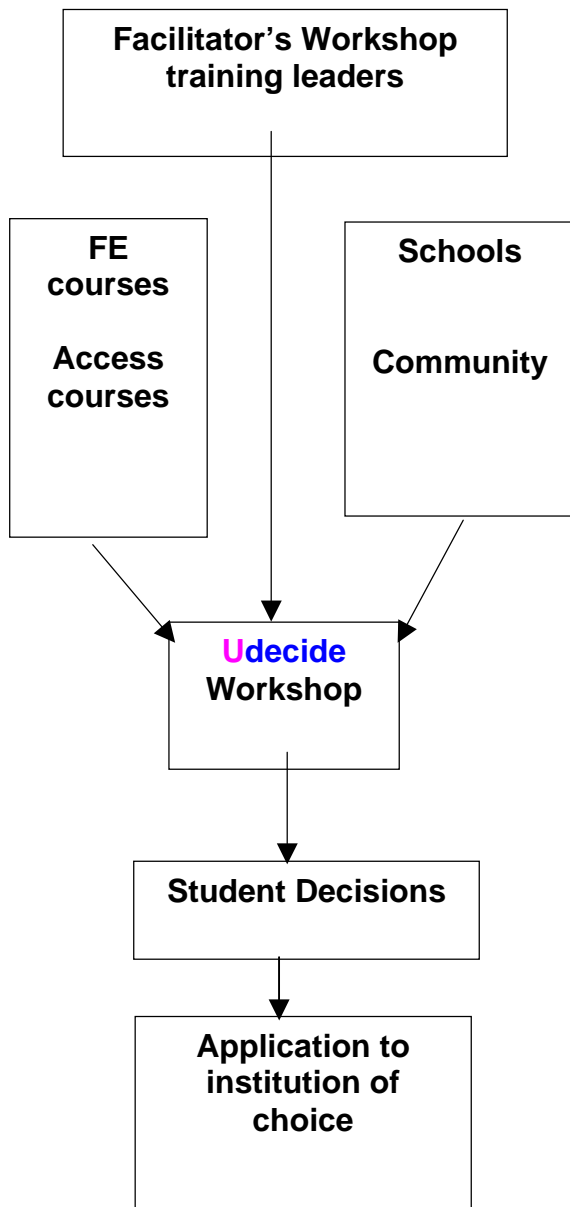
The project is currently involving learners from the following groupings:

- Students undertaking non-advanced courses in Further Education who wish to progress to Higher Education courses within Further Education Colleges;
- Students on Access courses or studying Highers (Scottish University entrance level examinations) within Further Education progressing to Higher Education courses in Further Education College or degree courses in Higher Education Institutions;
- Students progressing from Higher National courses to degree courses;
- Learners in the Community who wish to progress to either Further Education or Higher Education; and
- Students from schools who wish to progress to Higher Education Institutions.

The project will also contribute to existing work on increasing retention as research in the area has demonstrated that many early leavers had poor information about their programmes, made unreliable choices or joined programmes late. The project is developing a model that can be disseminated to all institutions so that, in time, this procedure can be delivered at institutional level.

## Further Education Strand

### Outline of the Udecide Programme



An initial letter of introduction to the project and a press release for college newsletters was sent to all Further Education members. A positive response was received from most colleges in the partnership.

Principals were then encouraged to release staff to take part in the Facilitator training Workshops.

Guidance and Student Services staff were asked to complete a short questionnaire to establish a benchmark for best practice.

### Workshops

The workshops are designed such that attendees can:

- Make SMART decisions (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time specific);
- Access people and resources to help them make their own decision;
- Assess the relationship between their present studies and other qualifications;
- Assess how advanced entry might affect them; and
- Evaluate their choice of programme.

The workshops follow a set agenda as follows:

1. Introduction
2. Ice-breaker (appendix 1)
3. Outline of the qualifications framework
4. Discussion and group task (appendix 2) on how to:
  - Gather information
  - Compare options
  - Succeed in small steps
  - Re-evaluate

5. Consideration of some case studies of decisions to be made by exemplar potential applicants (two examples from the 21 case studies available are given in appendix 3)
6. Developing an action plan

Students are guided to the relevant sources of personal and written information available from institutions. Their options are discussed as the relationship between

their own personal needs and the variations in subject, patterns of teaching, location, funding, etc. Given this information and a consideration of their own needs, participants are then encouraged to make decisions about their futures in terms of finances, time and opportunity.

In line with the Project Development Plan, three colleges were targeted for the initial pilot of the learner workshops. These were evaluated on the day and participating students are being tracked for a full year thereafter.

The selection of colleges for the initial phase of the project was based on geographic spread and range of student experience.

### **Facilitator Training**

In order to roll out the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the project for session 2004-2005, the project team has trained potential facilitators from academic and non-academic staff groups. Fourteen Facilitator's workshops have been held for over 100 staff from both education and community groups in locations as diverse as Dumfries in the south west to Coatbridge in the east of the Forum area. Facilitators complete Action Plans at the training workshop, committing to deliver Udecide workshops within their own institutions, which will be evaluated in due course. This has allowed for a "roll out" during Session 2004/5 while the project is still a pilot but will also begin the embedding of the process as part of routine guidance for the future.

### **Higher Education Contacts**

The team has created a shortened Udecide workshop for Clearing and Information Days to target learners when they may be taking decisions within very short timescales. The initial target was two seminars but due to a positive response, four sessions have taken place with a further one planned for Spring 2005. Bell College and the Universities of Strathclyde, Paisley and Glasgow have all participated. Contact has been made with all seven Higher Education providers in the area.

### **Community Contacts**

The first contacts with Community Groups proved positive. Following on from this, a Focus group was set up involving several community providers. One local authority had a planned event as part of their Adult Learners' Week 2004 and others requested information about places on Facilitator training workshops. Some facilitator training workshops to Community Tutors took place in the autumn and the future in widening provision to this population is being supported by a further project, the Addition Project, beginning in Spring 2005 and concentrating on supporting community learners by building on the success of the Udecide format.

Meetings have been held with Careers Scotland and have proved beneficial to both parties. The organisation is keen to work with the project. Their staff are presently involved in a substantial staff training programme developing a more skills based approach to career planning which will include life skills coaching and action planning.

## EFFECTIVENESS

Although target numbers were set at the beginning of the project, these were notional and were not intended to be the main criteria for evaluation. Qualitative comment was seen as being more important in a project of this type where progression to higher education may take several years and, indeed, be beyond the allotted time span of the project.

Learners complete an evaluation following the workshop and the pilot group of learners are being tracked for a full academic session (March 2004 – May 2005) after the event.

Examples of comments from the student evaluations include:

*“Very useful. Helped me make decisions when I was not very sure of how to make my choices about where to go next.”*

*“The project should be continued to give help to **all** students moving through career decisions.”*

*“Even though I have already made a lot of decisions, the workshop highlighted quite a few things I haven’t thought of yet and which I need to think about.”*

An independent evaluator has carried out a full evaluation of both the pilot workshops and the materials.

This document commends the project team on work to date and considers the project to be very valuable to learners. A sample of learners who had participated in the workshops were interviewed approximately three months after the event and comments noted. These included:

*“I never fully appreciated the things that could happen, like short-term money problems to buy equipment that you need for your studying and a lot of things that a lot of people don’t think about. And it also made you think about your life, breaking it down into small sections. And the presentation got you to look at yourself and made you more self-aware of what actual commitments you had. And the case studies were informative because there was a single person with kids that was trying to go back and get off the benefit system and found out what her priorities were and what she had to do to meet them. It was very informative.”*

*“It’s twenty five years since I left school and everything’s so different. Some of the jobs that are out there and courses, they never existed twenty five years ago.”*

*“I think they gave the information then it’s up to the individual to decide if they want further details. I think they covered it in the session pretty good.”*

The project team has adapted the evaluation questionnaires and developed some alternative materials based on the evaluator’s recommendations.

Facilitators also complete an evaluation following the training and are invited to attend “follow-up” events at approximately three and nine months when they have had an opportunity to experiment with the materials. The final event is planned for March 2005. They also have a web-board facility to post queries, make suggestions and share experiences with colleagues involved in the project.

An external evaluator will be appointed in Spring 2005 to consider whether the project has met its primary targets and what impact the project has had on the groups of learners involved.

## **PROPOSED FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS**

Minor modifications in the procedures are currently being implemented. An extension of funding may be available beyond the end date of July 2005 to ensure that all Forum partners fully embed the aims of the workshops within their guidance and student support systems and also to confirm increased figures for progression and retention in those learners who participated in the workshops.

## **REFERENCE**

Cook, A., Rushton, B.S., McCormick, S. and Southall, D. (2005). *Guidelines for the Management of Student Transition*. University of Ulster, Coleraine. Also at [http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star/resources/star\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star/resources/star_guidelines.pdf)

## **CORRESPONDENCE**

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## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

Star Case Study: Pre - Entry Guidance Work

<http://www.gla.ac.uk/wideningparticipation/initiatives/initiatives.html> - initiatives at the University of Glasgow

<http://www.swarf.ac.uk/> - Scottish Wider Access Regional Forums

<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 questions about higher education

**APPENDIX 1****Decision Making Quiz**

By yourself, work through the questions on making decisions and then discuss your answers with a partner.

- 1 You see a pair of trousers that you like in a shop. Do you
  - a) Try them on and buy a pair that fits
  - b) Try them on, put them back on the shelf and consider coming back on another day
  - c) Try them on, ask your friend's advice and even though you're not sure, buy them when the friend and the shop assistant say they are perfect
  
- 2 Your mate phones and tells you that he has tickets for a concert tonight with a double bill of the chart topping group Blurb and the singer Beyonce. You are supposed to be finishing an essay for your course. Do you
  - a) Say you can't go as the course is more important than the concert and to take someone else
  - b) Tell him you're not sure you have the time or enough money for the ticket, ask how you will get home late at night on a weekday and say you need to think about it
  - c) Tell him you've got an essay to finish and when he says you'll have plenty of time to do the essay later in the week and that there will only ever be one concert, agree to go
  
- 3 You are out with friends for a meal. When it comes to ordering, do you
  - a) Give your order to the waiter as soon as he arrives to take it
  - b) Ask everyone else what they are having, wait until they have all ordered and ask for the same as two of the others because you don't want to be different
  - c) Ask the waiter what he'd recommend and what he thinks the chef cooks best and go with his recommendation
  
- 4 One of your work colleagues suggests it is time to start investing in a savings plan with a view to going on holiday later in the year. Do you
  - a) Say "that's a good idea, let's go down at lunchtime and get it set up"
  - b) Say "that's a good idea" and spend four hours trawling the internet for the best rates
  - c) Say "that's a good idea. I'll ask the rest of the group what they did last year"
  
- 5 It's Friday night and everyone is winding down for the weekend. Someone suggests a meal and then going on to a club later. Do you:
  - a) Make your excuses because you know you can't afford it this close to pay day
  - b) Say you'll need to see what the rest of your mates are doing, ask what time people are likely to be in the restaurant, spend ages phoning

round your mates and end up going home because everyone is doing something different

- c) Agree to go even though you can't afford it because you don't want to be left out

Now, add up your scores

<b>Question</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>
Question 1			
Question 2			
Question 3			
Question 4			
Question 5			
<b>Total</b>			



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## Scores

In interpreting scores from relatively short tests like this it is important to realise that everyone will probably have some characteristics from each of the categories. The following interpretations therefore, merely indicate where you might lie based on your answers to these questions today.

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If you got mostly (a), you are probably ***an Impulsive Decider*** – one who takes the first alternative that is presented:

***“Act now, think later”***

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If you got mostly (b), you are an ***Agonising Decider*** – one who spends much time and thought in gathering data and analysing alternatives only to get lost amid the data they have accumulated:

***“I can’t make up my mind”***

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If you have mostly (c), you are a ***Compliant Decider*** – one who goes along with someone else’s plan rather than making his or her own decision:

***“If it’s OK with you, it’s OK with me”***

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## APPENDIX 2

### Group Task

In this exercise you are going to think about the tasks you need to perform to make a **SMART** decision about your future education. The following headings will give you some ideas of the sort of factors you need to take into consideration. Write down what you would have to do within the headings to make a **SMART** decision

<b>Gather Information</b>	<b>What do I have to find out</b>	<b>Notes</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What information do you require about the course you would like to study</li> <li>• Where would you find that information Think about the advantages and disadvantages of these sources.</li> </ul>		
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Options</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What to study Have you considered what you would like to do if you were not successful in your first choice?</li> </ul>		
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Where to study</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the advantages and disadvantages of where you have decided to study?</li> </ul>		

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>How to study</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What different options are there available?</li> </ul>		
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Succeeding</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do I make my decision a success?</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>What do I have to do</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Notes</b></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Re-evaluation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What happens if circumstances change?</li> <li>• What circumstance may arise that could lead to me re-evaluating my decision?</li> <li>• What can I do about it?</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>What do I have to do</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Notes</b></p>

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**APPENDIX 3****udecide Case Studies**

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**LEARNER CASE STUDIES****AMANDA**

Amanda is just 17 and is on an NQ in Care programme and, although she has been enjoying student life, she has been struggling with the work on the course. Most of Amanda's friends on the course will be progressing to the HNC in Care at the same college. Amanda is likely to complete the course by the end of session but is not sure whether she wants to go on to the demands of an HNC.

*Her friends say she should just carry on with them and they will help her.*

Amanda talks to her mum about her course but her mum has never been to college and is very proud that Amanda has gone and thinks she should stick with it. Amanda thinks that she might like to get a job just now and come back to college later, perhaps to study something else like Dance which is her hobby outside college.

**Have you any ideas about where Amanda could go for help?**

**What other options may be available for her?**



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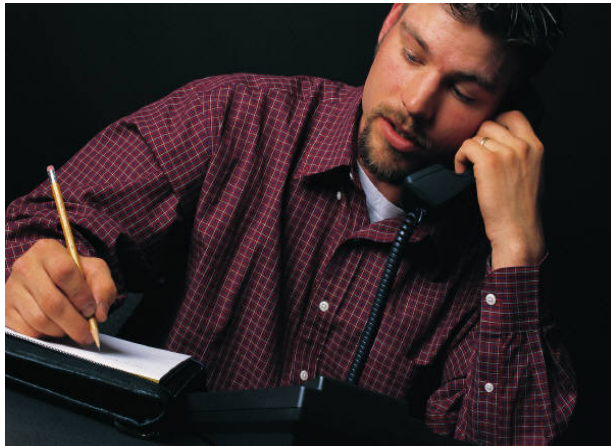
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## LEARNER CASE STUDIES



### JOE

Joe has started a job in a small restaurant after two years out of work. He is enjoying his job and his manager has decided that he should take some training courses in the evenings to increase his skills. Joe is happy about this as it may lead to more money and increased responsibility.

However Joe has a young family and spends much of his time with his partner, Eve, his children and looking after his infirm mother. He is not sure how to fit in the time required by the courses and his domestic responsibilities.

**Have you any suggestions for Joe and Eve to accommodate their busy lifestyles?**

**What would you do in their position?**

## CASE STUDY SOLUTIONS

### Potential solutions for Amanda

- Amanda could arrange to have a chat with her course tutor about whether she should go on to the HNC;
- She could also arrange an interview with Student Services about what other courses are available;
- Student Services will be able to tell her about her funding options if she changes to another course and job openings.

### Potential solutions for Joe and Eve

- Joe and Eve sit down with a plan of the week divided into mornings, afternoons and evenings;
- They also divide the boxes into His and Hers;
- Then they pencil in the demands which can't be changed – work, home (housework, washing, ironing gardening, etc), time for the children (swimming lessons, Beavers, dance classes) and time for Joe's mum;
- Next, they look at the schedule for the classes and estimate how much time Joe thinks he will need to study;
- Last, they pencil in time for themselves together and separately for things like a night out, shopping (not groceries) and Joe's Sunday football.
- Joe and Eve realise that they will need to be flexible but with some adjustment and some explanations to the family, it all works.

### Here is what Joe's Schedule might look like

	<b>Morning</b>	<b>Afternoon</b>	<b>Evening</b>
<b>Monday</b>	Study	Free/Housework, etc.	Kids/Mum
<b>Tuesday</b>	Work	Work	Class
<b>Wednesday</b>	Work	Work	Kids/Mum
<b>Thursday</b>	Work	Work	Class
<b>Friday</b>	Work	Work	Free: Joe and Eve
<b>Saturday</b>	Work	Work	Free: Joe and Eve
<b>Sunday</b>	Kids/Mum	Football/ Housework, etc.	Study