

Student Transition and Retention (STAR)

Edited by A. Cook, B.S. Rushton and K.A. Macintosh

The STAR (Student Transition and Retention) Project

www.ulster.ac.uk/star

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The STAR Project
Student Transition and Retention

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Background to the STAR Project

Anthony Cook, *The STAR Project, University of Ulster, Coleraine, Northern Ireland, BT52 1SA*

The STAR project was conceived as a means of providing evaluated examples of good practice in managing student transition. The issues surrounding the withdrawal of students from Higher Education inevitably provide the backdrop to the practices and have been well described by Yorke (1999) in the UK and Tinto (1993) in the USA. Activities designed to solve these problems in the USA have also been described in some detail through the activities of the National Resource Centre for the First Year Experience based in the University of South Carolina. Key events, which required to be addressed in the UK, had also been clearly indicated. Thus Martinez (2001), discussing student retention and achievement largely in the Further Education sector, provided the following list of strategies with the potential to improve both retention and the first year students' experience:

- Improving and extending advice and guidance services;
- Recruiting with integrity;
- Paying particular attention to the early stages of programmes of learning (student induction, initial assessment and the establishment of group ethos and identity);
- Establishing a close relationship with students through tutoring which is focused on student progress;
- Closer monitoring and follow up of poor attendance;

- Early identification of under-performing students or students who are ‘at risk’;
- The early diagnosis of student requirements for basic skills and additional learning support and the provision of such support as far as possible within student learning programmes;
- The development of a curriculum framework (structure of the college year and college week, balance of teaching and independent learning and appropriate course offers) which is appropriate for a college’s intended students;
- A variety of mechanisms to maintain or improve student motivation including parental liaison;
- Involvement, peer support and prizes and ceremonies;
- Target setting allied with formative assessment and feedback; and
- Improvements to teaching.

After four years’ experience examining practices in UK universities the STAR team could not disagree with any of these in the Higher Education sector. The different context, however, might lead to a greater explicitness of the promotion of independent learning as a basic skill and better advice and guidance directed at parents of students.

The lacuna which the project has sought to fill is the lack of detailed examples of good practice available directed at practitioners – hence the case studies which are presented on the STAR website (<http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star>) and in the STAR booklets. The purpose of this booklet therefore is set the studies in the context of UK Higher Education.

THE STAR STUDIES

The studies contained in the STAR booklets are all intended to provide enough information for practitioners to implement the practice in their own institution or at least to frame an argument that should be taken up at a management level. They have developed in three ways. Most are Case Studies that have been researched and written by the STAR team. Good practice was identified through a questionnaire administered to bioscience departments, and a narrative developed by interviews with relevant staff and validated through student focus groups. Thus they are considered to be good practice not only by staff but also by the students who have experienced them. The second source has been individual staff who volunteered to compile case studies of their own practice. These also contain aspects of student opinion. Finally the STAR project sponsored some changed practices and the evaluation of others as mini projects. These resulted in project reports, which have been edited into case studies formatted for publication. Despite the varying origin of the case studies they are all presented as practical guides to changes in practice on which students have had the opportunity to comment.

Just because a practice is reported here does not imply that it can be beneficially implemented in all circumstances. All studies are, therefore, presented with the context in which they were implemented. What works for one university may not work for another and what works for one individual member of staff may not work for another. Thus care must be exercised in the selection and adaptation of other practice so that it both fulfills the intentions of the implementer and capacity of the staff to deliver it.

Within this booklet, we present considerations of the background to admission, withdrawal and failure within Bioscience in the UK. Also we consider why it is that the remedial measures that have been advocated as successful in the USA have been largely rejected in this country.

First, Tony Cook reports the outcomes of an initial nationwide survey of Bioscience departments which was aimed at determining what common practices in student support were already in place and what staff felt was significant about them. A disappointing number of returns is perhaps indicative of the level of interest shown by individual staff even against a backdrop of institutional necessity. The most significant finding from this survey is perhaps the focus on the tutorial as a means of engaging student interest and on open days as a means of informing student opinion.

A frequent refrain from academic staff is that the quality of students has declined over recent years. Common complaints are that they are less able to recall what they have been told and less able to learn independently. New students have often experienced extended periods in secondary school or college and an examination of the qualifications being taken in these establishments has led to ideas of teacher dependent and risk averse learning strategies.

The reasons students do not persist on courses are two fold. First they leave of their own accord. The reasons for this have been well rehearsed by Yorke (1999) and Nutt (2005) and will not be discussed further except in the context of individual practices described in the STAR studies. The second reason for leaving, however, is academic failure. The reasons for academic failure are less well understood. Good guesses would relate to a failure of time management skills, balancing work, study and a student social life or a lack of motivation. Jon Scott and Maria Graal's contribution examines the student voice in this respect. What do students say when you ask them why they failed? The answer is very often that the standard required was unexpected and secondly that in any case they were only aiming just to pass since that is all the current system requires. Clearly one of Chickering and Gamson's (1987) characteristics of good teaching and learning practice (the communication of high expectations) is not being met. Finally, many failing students in this

review had problems with the English language. These are issues addressed in another booklet (Rushton *et al.*, 2006)

Finally, the retention riddle has a partial solution that has been adopted in the USA. This is the so-called first year seminar, some form of which can be found in many US institutions and which is credited with substantially reducing student drop out (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). It does this by increasing student commitment to the subject and institution and enhancing generic study skills. Such seminars are rarely subject based and have not found favour in the UK. Why not?

In conclusion this booklet seeks to provide some of the background to transition issues that are addressed by the STAR case studies. We have not attempted a comprehensive approach but have highlighted issues that are of contemporary importance and awareness of which might yield improvements in the student experience.

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A Survey of Current Practice of Induction in the Biosciences

Anthony Cook, *The STAR Project, University of Ulster, Coleraine, Northern Ireland, BT52 1SA*

SUMMARY

A questionnaire was circulated to all Bioscience departments in the UK. There were 35 responses. From this limited number it was clear that most of these departments were selective in the information routinely made available to applicants prior to their making decisions about entry. On entry most had a well-organised induction programme prior to the start of teaching. It was also apparent, however, that few staff had a clear idea of the process from a student perspective. Many departments had extended inductions in the form of study skills modules or module components. Staff felt that small group teaching was the most effective practice in retaining students. Few practices, however, had been fully evaluated to determine either student opinion of them or their effectiveness at meeting their intended goals.

Keywords: Student retention, induction, tutorial.

INTRODUCTION

During the course of their higher education students undergo a number of transition phases at various times and of varying importance. The most obvious and significant transition occurs when a student enters a new institution but others occur which are associated with a period of work-based learning or encountering new modes of attendance and teaching. Historically, most students have taken these transitions in their stride and require little support. With

the widening access into Higher Education and the greater expectations students have concerning both the vocational relevance of their studies and a rich social life, many students are now finding the balance between expectation and experience more difficult to manage unaided.

RELEVANCE TO THE STAR GUIDELINES

The underlying purpose of the questionnaire developed was to identify what staff felt was good practice (i.e. would assist in the achievement of some aspect of the guidelines). Thus this is relevant to all guidelines as a developmental aid. Further, it is an example of institutional research, which is an exemplar of guideline 4.3:

- 4.3 Staff should seek to monitor their own performance in managing student transition through a process of focused investigation, personal reflection and development and seek to communicate the outcomes to others.

Cook et al. (2005)

METHOD

One of our first steps in this endeavour was to circulate through the LTSN Centre (Biosciences) a questionnaire with the aim of getting an overview of current practice in induction and associated events, mainly in year one, in UK Bioscience Departments. The questionnaire followed the then STAR themes of events prior to entry, induction, accessibility and flexible progression.

A poor return of questionnaires resulted in our shortening the questionnaire and re-circulating it through HUBS (Heads of University Biological Science). By December 2003, 23 copies of the long version of the questionnaire had been returned and 12 of the short version.

This report refers to those aspects of the two questionnaires that they had in common. This mainly focused on background information (to put each return in context), aspects of practice prior to entry and the initial (pre-teaching) induction.

RESULTS

The Student Timeline

Each student interacts with the university along a timeline that starts at the time of first contact and ends when that student leaves (early or otherwise). This timeline is continuous for students but can be disjointed for academic and non-academic staff who may have responsibility for (or knowledge of) only a small part of it.

Background Characteristics

Twenty-nine institutions reported on 35 courses. One institution that sent in two reports reported on a school level provision and on a course within that provision. Since the latter is a subset of the former the smaller provision has not been included in the statistical treatment. Not every course completed every question. There was a mean of 105 students in each course returning a questionnaire (range 16-520). Although 61.5% of these students were female, individual courses ranged from 0 to 100%. Fifteen percent of the students were mature (over 21 on entry). The academic achievements of entrants also varied considerably. The mean UCAS asking points was 250 (ranging from 160-390). On entry the mean UCAS points total acceptable was 233 (ranging from 100-370). Seventy-two percent of entrants offered A levels (or Scottish Highers) as their entry qualification.

Fifteen percent of students entering their first year in 2001 did not progress to year two of that course. The highest frequency (43.7%) was characterised by a low student number with a high proportion of early leavers and a large number of students who transferred to

another course within the same institution. Details for the 30 courses submitting data are given in Table 1.

Source	Mean %	Min. %	Max. %
Early leavers	4.6	0	25
Changed course	2.7	0	17.5
Failed academically	5.3	0	22.6
Failed to rejoin year two	1.4	0	18.5
Total	14.1	0.6	43.7

Table 1: The loss of Bioscience students from 30 courses in Higher Education institutions in the UK.

Events Prior to Entry

We asked questions relating to the amount of information sent to students or available at on-campus events during which potential students can gain information about the course and the institution.

Interviewing

There is much variation in practice between institutions. Thus five courses interviewed all applicants and two interviewed none. There is no significant difference in student achievement on entry between institutions interviewing and those not interviewing. This, however, is largely because those who interviewed all students were either those with extremely high entry requirements interviewing perhaps to differentiate between well-qualified applicants, or those with a high proportion of part-time and mature students interviewing to ensure that applicants have the motivation to complete the course. This observation notwithstanding, those institutions that interview all applicants have an average UCAS entry points of about 300 whilst

those that interview none or only a proportion have an average entry points level of 220.

The Information Available Prior to Entry

Some issues arise because new students meet aspects of life in Higher Education for which they are ill prepared. Table 2 shows that most institutions make a wide range of information available to students by the time they enter to take up their places, although the expected workload is not formally communicated to many.

Because some retention problems stem from a lack of information or inappropriate information being available while initial choices are being made, we were interested in *when* curriculum information reached students. Ideally this information should be available while the choice is being made.

Information sent prior to entry	Number of courses (%)
Accommodation	32 (94.1)
Career information	20 (58.8)
Curriculum details	26 (76.5)
Disabilities	23 (67.6)
Entry requirements	25 (73.5)
Expected workload	13 (38.2)
Finance	19 (55.9)

Table 2: Details of the information sent to students prior to entry to courses in Biosciences (n = 34).

Although there are many informal mechanisms at work giving information to students such as open days and visit days, interviews, etc., we asked when ALL prospective students were given detailed curriculum information. Table 3 shows the timing of curriculum information reaching students.

Timing	Number of courses (%)
At interview	9 (26.5)
Before making final choice	6 (17.6)
With joining instructions	6 (17.6)
At enrolment	20 (58.8)

Table 3: The timing of curriculum details communicated to all prospective Bioscience students (n = 34). Note some institutions send information on more than one occasion.

While 44% of courses send curriculum information to applicants prior to their final UCAS choice, 18% leave it until they send joining instructions. Fourteen courses (41%) *only* make curriculum details available at enrolment. Many universities make curriculum details freely available on their websites and it is possible to get details down to the level of module descriptions for some. For others, this information is released relatively late to applicants. The information available publicly on websites varies considerably and the uses made of it by students are not known. In the questionnaire respondents were asked whether their course information was available on their website. These websites were then checked to see the level of available information. It has been classified into descriptions of courses in Table 4.

Level of course detail publicly available	No. of courses (%)
None	2 (5.9)
Course description (description of whole course with no division by years or modules)	12 (35.3)
Course structure (description of course naming modules)	3 (8.8)
Year descriptions (description of whole years without modules)	1 (2.9)
Year structure (description of modules within years)	7 (20.6)
Module outlines (each module named with a short description)	4 (11.8)
Detailed module descriptions (full featured module descriptions)	5 (14.7)

Table 4: The curriculum details available for Biosciences courses on institutional websites (n = 34).

Admissions Advice

Eighty-eight percent of courses had their admissions procedures handled by academic staff (n = 22), while the remaining 12% (three institutions) left admissions to administrative staff. The suitability of staff to advise prospective students at this critical time clearly needs some discussion. This is especially true during clearing when matching prospective students to the appropriate institution and course is critical.

Effective Practice

A free response question asked staff what they considered to be their most effective practice in preparing students before they came to

university. Twenty-six responses were received and the responses were varied. The most popular was open days (seven courses) with a further two courses specifying visits to the particular department involved. The provision of a detailed curriculum and course details was cited by six courses and the maintenance of personal contact between individual staff and prospective students was cited by five. These practices emphasise the perceived value of communicating effectively with students prior to entry and the advantages of developing some personal contact. Less common but notable practices included the selection of high quality students (three courses) and interviewing (three courses).

Some respondents commented that they were only guessing at what might be good practices because much of what they do was unevaluated.

Induction

The duration of pre-teaching induction varies considerably but this may reflect a lack of shared understanding about what induction is.

Induction is conducted at a number of levels in most institutions. The one-day induction is the most common and it is conducted at a variety of levels. Fifty-three percent of universities, 40% of faculties, 47% of departments and 40% of courses have a one-day induction. Longer pre-teaching inductions are less common but where they do occur they are most commonly conducted at a departmental or course level. Twenty-five percent of courses have a two or more day induction. Three courses (8.8%) reported a five-day university level induction. Only 6% reported a single level induction lasting only one day.

Responsibility for pre-teaching induction is commonly divided between the course team and the institution and is likely to last one or two days.

Respondents were asked to list the components of their induction programme. The most frequently mentioned were: orientation (87%); social events (65%); academic advice (58%); study skills (35%); and health and safety (19%). Orientation was taken to mean an outline of the key places and people relevant to first year students but without extended social interactions.

Twenty percent of courses provided an induction that was tailored to meet the needs of mature students.

When the extent of variation in registration week activities became apparent we contacted each university with a significant Bioscience component and asked for the joining instructions with the programme of pre-registration week activities. Fifteen responded with the pre-teaching induction programme. All but one of these was a full programme of five days activity.

Respondents to the questionnaire were asked to list the events organised in induction week and their responses are presented in Table 5.

In our sample of 15 sets of joining instructions, the induction programmes normally incorporated both a university welcoming element and a course-based information session, often involving descriptions of modules and choices. Social events were common and extremely varied but often organised by the students' union or guild. Preliminary laboratory exercises including health and safety information were included in a minority of institutions. From this sample of induction programmes, it is clear that the list of activities derived from the questionnaire is a conservative one and it may be assumed that respondents were not always aware of the experiences of their students in this week and which might well be organised elsewhere.

Activity in Induction week	Number of courses (%)
Description of academic procedures	26 (76.5)
Description of available choices	10 (29.4)
Health and Safety talks	8 (23.5)
IT tours	12 (35.3)
Library tours	22 (64.7)
Social events	20 (58.8)
Study skills development	8 (23.5)
Team Building	2 (5.9)

Table 5: The activities conducted in registration week for year one Bioscience students (n = 34).

Extended Induction

We have defined extended induction as those processes that may run through the whole year designed to support the adoption of appropriate study skills. Thirty courses responded and none of these relied entirely on the induction programme to deliver study skills. Table 6 shows the location of study skills developments. The categories are not mutually exclusive.

Timing	Number of courses (%)
During induction	9 (32.1)
In a separate module	24 (74.7)
Within subject based modules	15 (20.1)

Table 6: The organisation of study skills development in year one Bioscience courses (n = 30).

Of the 28 study skills courses reported, 80% had some form of diagnostic assessment designed to identify students who may not be adequately prepared for their higher education experience. Table 7 shows that the means by which this assessment is conducted varies between courses.

The means of diagnostic assessment	Number of courses (%)
Formative assessment	11 (39.3)
Interview	20 (71.4)
Personal development planning	10 (35.7)
Pre entry characteristics	6 (21.4)
Pre entry qualifications	15 (53.6)
Student self-assessment	19 (67.9)

Table 7: The means of diagnostic assessment for 28 Bioscience courses.

Effective Practice

Respondents were asked what they thought was their most effective practice in assisting students to adjust to the first year of university. The most popular was a tutorial system. Some (15) specified a structured system with regular meetings designed to support subject specific and transferable skills while others (13) mentioned the advantages of promoting staff-student contact which a regular tutorial system engenders. All other aspects mentioned were rare by comparison, with study skills modules (five) and the activities in induction week (three) receiving multiple citations. Student mentoring was mentioned by two courses.

Non-traditional Entry Points

Although the problems encountered by students entering courses at non-traditional points such as at the end of the first semester or joining the second year do present problems of transition, the frequency of these occurrences is very low. Table 8 shows the frequency of students availing themselves of these non-traditional entry points in Biosciences.

Flexible Progression	Mean no. of students (%)	Max. no. of students (%)	% of courses involved
Entering in semester two	0.6	11.1	9.4
Returning from leave of absence	1.3	8.0	45.5
Occasional students	0.3	5.4	11.8
Slow track students	0.6	4.0	26.5
Advanced standing (UK)	3.7	90.0	29.4
Advanced standing (international)	0.9	10.0	26.5
Exchange students	1.1	14.5	26.5

Table 8: The variety of modes of flexible progression in Bioscience courses (n = 34).

It is clear that few students enter courses at unpredictable times but that there is a frequent occurrence of other types of non-standard progression which affects around a quarter of courses. Overall, 71% of course have students admitted these non-traditional routes. Thus although problems associated with unusual entry routes are rarely

great in terms of the number of students they are widespread. Induction sessions tailored for the needs of non-traditional students are held in 29% of courses.

Effective Practice

Respondents were asked what they thought their most effective practice was in easing the transition of students entering or progressing in non-traditional ways. Only 16 responses were received and most answered this question in the context of the management of placement, it being the most common form of non-traditional progression. The assignment of individual members of staff to oversee the placement experience of individual students was cited most frequently (five courses). Other placement support activities included the placement visits and students giving seminars at the end of placement to those contemplating placement. Three courses mentioned the provision of specialised induction for non-traditional (particularly part-time) students.

DISCUSSION

Student Retention

About 15% of students failed to re-join after their first year. Institutional statistics often reflect a different measure of retention from the national statistics. Institutions tend to measure the retention of those who registered while national statistics measure those students who were still enrolled in December. Since many students change course or leave in the early months of their higher education career, the statistics presented here probably over estimate nationally reported attrition. Of those who failed to progress, only about a third failed academically. The remaining two thirds chose to leave, either early, by changing course or by not re-enrolling. It is expected that it is these volunteer leavers on whom changes in practice will have the greatest impact.

Informing Students

One of the reasons why students leave early is that their expectations of university are not met. This does not mean that universities should necessarily change their practices but it does imply that they should be more open with prospective students when describing their courses and the life-style to be expected. Over half of the courses surveyed here did not make curriculum details available to students until after they were committed to accepting a place. When information was sent to students less than a third discussed the expected workload.

Student Induction

One of the problems encountered in this type of exercise is the lack of a shared language among the practitioner community. Although some definitions of induction were offered in the questionnaire, it is apparent that these did not override the preconceptions of many respondents. For the purposes of this report 'induction' refers to the pre-teaching activities, commonly held in registration week. Extended induction refers to modules and or tutorial sessions designed to support students to develop appropriate study skills in year one.

Most courses clearly put significant effort into pre-teaching induction. This process, however, is relatively short. It remains to be seen how much students retain of this very intensive period of their higher education. The brevity and intensity of this induction is compensated for by an extended induction that takes the form of either a dedicated module or tutorial support and other extra-modular activities.

Effective Practice

Staff were asked what they thought their most effective practice was in various contexts. Some responded that they were only guessing because their practices had never been evaluated. While academic

staff probably have a good intuitive understanding of what works in their own institutions and for their own students, in a period of rapid change they might be less reliable than hitherto. With widened participation, staff will be dealing with a diversity of students some of whom may not benefit fully from the mechanisms that were put in place in other contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of this questionnaire has yielded much useful information and highlighted some good practice across the sector. Although it cannot give a comprehensive view of induction or retention, it served to identify some practices that the STAR project followed up.

Responding to Changes in Pre-entry Qualifications

Anthony Cook, *The STAR Project, University of Ulster, Coleraine, Northern Ireland, BT52 1SA*

SUMMARY

Recent trends in the courses offered by schools and Further Education colleges have led to changes in the attributes that new entrants bring to Higher Education. These trends are related to the requirements of qualifications with a better specified content and more defined assessment schemes with detailed outcomes and criteria. In addition, students can repeat aspects of the assessment to improve their grades. This appears to have led to a teacher-dependent, risk-averse learning culture, culminating in the oft-heard phrase “Just tell me what I need to know to pass the assessment”.

Some attributes and attitudes of incoming students depend on current teaching and assessment methods in AVCEs and A level examinations. Appropriate responses include aspects of communicating with applicants prior to entry to better prepare them for Higher Education, induction procedures which are sensitive to the rapid changes experienced by new students and changes in the first year curriculum and assessment which may be necessary to adapt students to the learning culture at university.

Keywords: student retention, first year curriculum, assessment.

INTRODUCTION

The transition processes undergone by students entering Higher Education are conceptually simple. We need to know the start and the end points of the process and then design a way to get students

from one to the other. For the first year curriculum this implies knowledge both of the desirable qualities in students progressing to year two and also the attributes and ambitions of students on entry.

Recent pressures on schools to perform to a set of targets has inevitably led to an improvement in standards at school measured as examination success. Each year more students are gaining higher grades and it is becoming more difficult to discriminate between applicants on the basis of grades alone. Further, as a greater proportion of the 18-year-old population is admitted we have gained a problem of understanding what it is they know and can do when they present with Cs and Ds at A level or with Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education (AVCE).

The management of student transition then requires knowledge of the destination and the point of departure. It involves understanding the activities of teachers, pupils and examining boards prior to entry and those of students and academic staff in year one at university.

TRANSITION

The Destination

Most academic staff could list the sorts of qualities they deem desirable in students entering year two of a degree programme. Such a list would undoubtedly include aspects of independent learning including the ability to find and interpret information and of being highly motivated. There would also be a component of subject expertise so that a particular knowledge base could be assumed when teaching in year two. Added to these would be some notion of students being socially well adjusted so that they could participate effectively in group-work and have a mature attitude towards an appropriate work-life balance.

By the time students enter year two of Higher Education staff often assume positive and realistic student attitudes towards, for instance, plagiarism, resits and attendance.

The Point of Departure

The attributes of students on arrival at university are much less well defined than those applicable to the entry into year two. Although university staff may know how they might like the new intake to be, new students seldom conform to their expectations. Students enrol with a variety of qualifications and these themselves have changed rapidly over recent years. Further, new students respond in a range of different ways to the new freedoms that they acquire in Higher Education. Differing styles of teaching, learning and assessment in the various pre-entry qualifications also add to the diversity among incoming students. While diversity in itself is not a problem, changes in pre-entry qualifications are resulting in these differences often being unrecognised among those delivering the first-year curriculum in Higher Education.

Assessment Schemes

Changes in the ways in which second level qualifications are assessed have led those assessment methods away from the pattern common in Higher Education.

In A level Biology (Northern Ireland) (CCEA 2002) about 80% of the marks are awarded for examinations. There are a total of 6.75 hours of examination time spread over two years with the maximum duration of an examination being 90 minutes. Distributing the marks over the available time indicates that a candidate should spend no more than 18 minutes on any one question. In the examination a total of 17% of the marks are awarded for answers written in continuous prose. Examination of the questions that ask for answers in continuous prose, however, reveals that they are normally highly structured with as many as 12 indicators to structure for a 13-mark answer. Thus, although they have to write in English they are rarely

asked to construct an argument or compose a piece requiring a beginning, a middle and an end.

Even allowing that most candidates will be taking three A levels, this examination schedule represents approximately half the intensity of examinations typically experienced in Higher Education (three hour examinations and fewer questions).

In the AVCE Science (Double Award) (Edexcel, 2000) four of the 12 modules are currently externally assessed by examination and represent 33% of the marks. Each of these four examinations is 90 minutes. Again this represents an intensity of examination much lower than that commonly experienced in Higher Education.

The coursework in A level Biology represents about 20% of the available marks. Coursework can be repeatedly refined and re-submitted to improve the grade awarded. Thus one teacher commented:

“Teachers ensure at all times that pupils remain ‘on message’. All pupils submit at least two drafts. Some enter their coursework project in January and re-submit in June to secure an improved grade.”

In the AVCE Science (Double Award) (Edexcel, 2000), eight of the 12 modules are assessed by portfolio. Portfolios are written to an assessment grid that dictates the content and the marking criteria for each grade. Thus, in the module *Investigating Science at Work* (Edexcel, 2000), students prepare their portfolio including detailed reports on:

“Two local (regional or national if not available locally) organizations you have studied that use scientific knowledge or processes (one must be involved in manufacturing or production, and one provide a service). The reports must describe the type of scientific work,

including the number and type of people who work in the organization.”

To achieve a grade A, their work must show 13 qualities, three examples of which are:

- A survey of organizations and two reports describing the type of work that takes place in two organizations;
- An identification and use of the main source of information and, where appropriate, additional sources of information to support your findings; and
- An outline of the basic economic costs and benefits of the science used in the two organizations, and the ways in which the organizations and their products impact on the local community.

Edexcel (2000)

There is much to be commended in the level of explicitness in secondary assessment. It results, however, in students being trained to meet highly defined outcomes and in their meeting a selection of the syllabus. When students arrive at a typical university there is often not the same level of advice and support. Further, the Higher Education course specification and module descriptions are written as a minimum specification since it normally specifies what a student needs to do to pass. In a university system there also appears to be a greater assessment load; there is more summative coursework and a greater examination load. Formative assessment in many universities has been reduced because students are often motivated by marks and behave strategically. There is much less support; student groups tend to be larger and individuals can become anonymous. Furthermore, since the teacher is also the assessor, the appropriateness of staff assisting students directly with assessment is questionable. This can result in confusion leading to the student comment:

“I did not know what was expected of me in some assessments.”

University of Ulster student

Thus the intensity of both examination and coursework is much higher at university than in secondary education and the availability, even sometimes the propriety, of tutor support for assessment is limited.

Teaching and Learning Methods

Prior to entry, teachers largely manage pupils' learning. Thus comments about methods from teachers include:

“Past examination questions are unpacked and pupils taught to select and highlight key words.”

“Targets are set by teachers.”

“Pupils are taught to focus their learning when reading.”

“Pupils are issued with the syllabus requirements and the marking criteria are highlighted to raise pupils' awareness of the standards required.”

“Pupils and staff feel that they belong to a community. We are mutually dependent. For this reason staff will support learning, recognising pupils difficulties with study demands. Pupils are, in turn, motivated by a sense of belonging.”

Secondary School Teachers

In a target driven system in which school performance is judged by the examination performance of its pupils, teacher-centred teaching is to be expected; little should be risked for attributes that are not measured.

Independent Learning

Most Higher Education staff would claim the promotion of independent learning as a major goal. Students will have to be independent at the end of the course and that transition tends to start early. In secondary education, independence, although desirable, is not a major goal. Thus, in discussing independent learning by pupils, one teacher commented:

“Most teachers feel that there is less independent learning now than in previous years. The reality is that learning is structured and focussed. All pupils are encouraged to think and work independently – but there is a strong element of guidance.”

and in discussing transition to university:

“Pupils have been accustomed to teachers issuing examination specification and marking criteria. They still need this guidance to continue at university.”

“To date, their learning has been structured and supported, with heavily supervised study and parental involvement. What happens when all of this is suddenly removed?”

The Role of the Examination Boards

Examining boards produce syllabuses and a wide range of supporting literature. This indicates not only the syllabus content and assessment tools but also the level of treatment expected. Past papers and associated mark schemes are published, as is a chief examiner’s report which comments on the performance of the year’s assessment. Teachers welcome such openness and explicitness since it helps frame the way the syllabus is delivered and it is welcomed by pupils since it helps define how much (or how little) has to be learned.

There is obviously a close relationship between the syllabus, the teachers' guidance, the examination questions, the mark schemes and the chief examiner's report. Tracking through the evolution, marking and candidate performance on a question is informative. Most of what a candidate needs to know is in the guidance notes for teachers and clear guidance to teachers becomes advice to candidates about how little to learn. There is also some indication that where information is contained in more than one section of the syllabus then it confuses the candidates.

THE STUDENT VOICE

Students clearly know that there is a significant transition from school or college to university. Most manage it successfully but some find it difficult while others falter and drop out. When asked what was most difficult when joining the university few students put the difficulties of work first. Comments included the following:

- Moving from the country to the city;
- Transport to the university;
- Getting lost in the university;
- Making new friends since home friends tended to be of long-standing;
- Language problems (international student); and
- Adjustment from working (mature students).

When directed towards more academic matters they cited:

- Group working is difficult to achieve successfully – more training needed;

- A lot is expected in presentations at an early stage, e.g. use of Powerpoint – more training needed;
- Getting notes from WebCT is not always straightforward – needs to be clearly explained and demonstrated;
- Intensity of continuous assessment;
- Tend to leave all assessment until the last minute; and
- Not being chased for submission of work.

Their academic difficulties are in adapting to the university infrastructure and in dealing with assessment.

APPROPRIATE RESPONSES

University teachers need to communicate their expectations more clearly to schools and new entrants and to adapt their practices in year one to effect a smoother transition between secondary and tertiary teaching and assessment methods. The STAR project has identified a number of instances of good practice in promoting such a transition.

Information sent out prior to entry influences student attitudes. This can be in the form of workshops to give students better insights into the expectations of Higher Education and improve their decision-making (Cormack, 2006; Watson, 2006) or in better, more accurate, literature (Davies *et al.*, 2006). Frequent and supportive communication with prospective students can increase their awareness of future commitments and also start a process of social integration (McKillop and Walker, 2006). Student mentoring around the time of entry also helps convey the information that incoming students need (Macintosh *et al.*, 2006).

Once on campus students need to adapt rapidly to their changed circumstances since their first summative assessment may be only days or weeks away.

Extended induction processes tend to achieve three important outcomes. First, they help form rapid social contacts between students and between students and staff (McLaughlin and Southall, 2006). Second, they can communicate, in an immediate and practical way, the expectations of staff as far as academic standards are concerned. This can be re-assuring for many students who are uncertain about their competence. Third, extended induction can convey some of the excitement in studying a subject in an open and investigative way and reinforce the intrinsic motivation students will need to be independent learners. Other practices which can ease the transition include the modification of assessment schemes to encompass, at least in year one, some elements of the secondary system such as repeating assignments for better grades, the submission of drafts, etc. (Sutton and McLaughlin, 2006)

Finally, it is important that teachers in Higher Education know and understand the changing nature of the teaching and assessment methods in appropriate pre-entry qualifications as well as the subject content since the student attitudes formed through the seven years of secondary education will far outlast their knowledge of the syllabus. Institutional research therefore should also include close monitoring of the changing nature of pre-entry qualifications.

CONCLUSION

The schools, pupils and the examining boards form a triangle of success. The boards tell the teachers precisely what it is that the pupils should know, the teachers ensure that the pupils know it and the boards then test to see how *well* they know it. This target driven approach is leading to the syllabus and the information produced along with it *becoming* the subject. Many candidates are learning

only what they need to know to get a good grade in the examination. The best candidates are as they ever were – enthusiastic, interested and intrinsically motivated. The poorer candidates are, however, able to gain relatively good grades by learning without great understanding, doing without knowing (or asking) why and repeating assessment until successful. They depend on teachers and parents for their motivation.

This appears like a good arrangement. It ensures good outcomes; the students know what they should know and the schools perform well against the performance criteria that they are set. It does not necessarily, however, prepare students well for a Higher Education experience during which they will live independently, many for the first time and be left to organise their own learning.

Teachers in Higher Education cannot conspire with the candidates to outwit the examiner because the teacher *is* the examiner. What we can do, however, is to develop transitional arrangements in year one, which incorporate features of second level teaching and assessment as a means to ease new students into year two. This will become increasingly important as participation is widened and student learning becomes increasingly strategic at secondary level.

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Why Are Students Failing? An Interview Based Investigation of Factors Underlying Academic Failure in the First Year

Jon Scott, *Department of Cell Physiology and Pharmacology,
University of Leicester, Maurice Shock Medical Sciences Building,
University Road, Leicester, LE1 9HN*

Maria Graal, *Student Learning Centre, University of Leicester,
College House, University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH*

SUMMARY

This project set out to investigate some of the underlying reasons for student failure in the first year of study and to try to identify any common features, particularly those issues related to student transition.

Students who failed one or more modules attended a structured interview with the Head of the Student Learning Centre. No common features relating to background or pre-university experience were identified. Common features which did emerge from the interviews included: lack of appreciation of the amount of work required, lack of incentive because the first year does not count towards the final qualification, lack of motivation in specific modules where the subject matter was not found particularly interesting and the absence of someone who monitored their progress and made them do the work.

Keywords: Student retention, first year experience, examination failure.

INTRODUCTION

Whilst considerable attention has been directed towards researching the factors contributing to student withdrawal in the first year of Higher Education, less attention has been focused on students failing academically. The School of Biological Sciences at the University of Leicester currently recruits approximately 140 undergraduate students per year, 85 of whom follow the Biological Sciences (C100) degree programme. Most of these come via traditional A level routes with about 10% entering via other routes such as access courses. Over recent years there has been a slow increase in the UCAS tariff points (UCAS, 2006) of the entrants such that for the academic year 2003-04, the entry level was 280 points and for entry in October 2005, the level was set at 300 points (BBB at A2). Over the same period the School has increased its student support activities in a range of areas, including strengthening the personal tutor system, monitoring attendance and enhancing the study skills training delivered to the students via the University's Teaching and Learning Unit.

These, and related activities, appear to have been effective in terms of reducing the proportion of students who voluntarily withdraw during the first year: for the 2001 entrants, the withdrawal rate was 2.3%. This rose over the next two years, to 4.5% in 2002 and then reaching 8.6% for the cohort that entered in 2003. Subsequently, the rate fell to 3.6% for the 2004 entrants. Over the same periods, however, there has been a progressive increase in the number of students failing first year modules in Biological Sciences and having to resit one or more modules. Thus, the proportion of students having to resit at least one module was 11.6% in the academic year 2000-01. This rose to 16.3%, 29.4%, 25.7% and 20.0% (2004-05) over the succeeding years. This is occurring against the background of a stable format and content of first year teaching and assessment.

The project was designed as a series of structured interviews of failing students, at each assessment stage of the first year, to identify

any common underlying factors including their pre-entry experience, course induction, prior academic achievement, study strategies and social or financial situation. Students who failed at one stage and then passed subsequent assessments were also re-interviewed to identify any change in strategy.

This study is forming part of an ongoing review of first year teaching with the intention of improving both student retention and performance and thereby facilitating the transition that occurs during the first year.

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 aims of the project relate to all three phases of the STAR guidelines with particular emphasis on Section three (curriculum development).

Cook *et al.* (2005)

METHODOLOGY

The project was undertaken by the School in conjunction with the Student Learning Centre at the University of Leicester, during the academic year 2004-05. The Centre has experience in providing consultation and support for students and it was felt that students might be more open in discussing their position with someone who was not an academic member of the School.

During the first stage of the project a semi structured interview schedule was designed (Appendix 1). This loose structure was developed to address the themes of specific interest whilst also allowing flexibility for the students to expand on their answers and, perhaps, move the focus towards other, less predictable, aspects.

A period of two hours was set aside for each interview and the interviews were recorded (with the students' explicit permission). After the interview, the discussion was transcribed to enable identification of key, emergent issues.

The interviews were scheduled at three stages in the academic year: following the first semester and second semester examinations and also following the September resit examinations. The contact details of students failing one or more modules were passed to the staff of the Student Learning Centre, who then made contact with the students and undertook the interviews. As a result, the interviews were fully anonymised with respect to the academic staff of the School. Overall, 13 first year students participated in the study and the key findings are discussed below.

FINDINGS

Students felt that failure was attributable to a variety of causes, generally specific to their own circumstances. We have not been able to identify any common background factors across the small sample of students that were interviewed. Only three of the 13 students did not have a family experience in Higher Education. Only three students could be identified as coming from non-traditional routes. We have not therefore been able to identify a specific predictor of which students are most likely to fail. However, there were recurring themes in the interviews that are worthy of note, and these are listed below.

'Going into the exam blind'

Seven of the students interviewed said they felt that not knowing the level of detailed required for examination answers was a major difficulty in their first year examinations. Students did not see this as the reason why they failed – but it was given as a factor that made passing difficult. Although students could see past papers for all

modules, they agreed that it was the required level of detail that was the unknown factor. Two students said they felt that knowing this at the start of the first year would have enabled them to make more effective notes in lectures. These responses were made despite there being mock examinations during the latter parts of the modules. These contain similar questions to those to be taken in the actual examination, are marked and feedback given to the students. Clearly the procedures in place to support students adjust to changes in the level of work are not effective for all students.

'The first year doesn't count towards your degree'

One of the most common reasons cited for failure was that insufficient effort was made; for some students this was because they knew the first year did not count towards the degree and they only needed to pass. Students admitted that this attitude was not ideal, but had come to university with the perception that they needed only to pass the first year. Five of the interviewed students cited insufficient effort as the reason for their failure; i.e. that they had misjudged the minimum amount required to get a pass.

'Failing was my wake up call'

Students who failed the first year due to the above reason said that the failure in semester one had made them change their attitude. Some even claimed that it did them good to fail because it made them change the way they worked. Students who were interviewed in the first term of their second year felt that failing enabled them to change their approach in plenty of time for the second year, which was ultimately to their benefit.

'I just didn't like that module'

Three students cited problems with the subject matter of a specific module as the reason why they had failed. These students felt that failure was specific to that module and indeed these students did only fail one module across the year. These students all had organised

approaches to study and were generally studious, but the lack of interest in the particular module had a de-motivating effect and resulted in a poor level of engagement/understanding/retention of information.

Pre-university Experience

One of the prime objectives of this research was to examine any relationship between academic failure and academic background. There was no consistency, however, across students from similar types of pre-university backgrounds. Whether from a school or College, students varied as to whether they perceived a big difference in the learning and teaching style. Where students did discuss differences, the most common area was a lack of personal attention. Students referred to teachers not being there to provide motivation or monitor their progress. However, students generally accepted this difference as being part of the Higher Education experience and whilst it required some adjustment, saw it as ultimately beneficial.

In terms of the concern expressed about the differences between Higher Education and their prior experience, it was two of the students with educational experience outside of the UK who had the greatest difficulty in making the transition. This is discussed under the 'At Risk Groups and Pre-emptive Support' section below.

Programme Delivery

Students were very positive about the teaching they experienced during their first year. However, some students commented that it would be helpful if staff had set times when they were available to see students. This is not policy within the School, but it is made clear to the students, through the documentation and in lectures that they should feel free to contact staff by e-mail to arrange meetings. Some students expressed reluctance to arrange an appointment for something that seemed rather minor. Another student, however, referred to e-mailing staff as a positive aspect of the programme delivery and found this helpful.

The lack of time available to revise over Christmas compared to Easter was mentioned more than once. Other practical suggestions for improvements mentioned only once were:

- Have an easier first term to give students time to get used to things!;
- Have an overall syllabus that can be used as a revision check list;
- Modules should all follow the same pattern to be consistent;
- Organise deadlines across modules so they do not bunch together;
- Have breaks in between sessions so students have time to move from one session to the next;
- Do not schedule help sessions at the end of the day (4.30 p.m.) when students with child care arrangements have to rush home;
- Provide a group work area for students to meet and discuss work; and
- Provide a peer support system for first years.

Some of these reflect an interesting view of the design of the first year programmes: for example, the concept of a ‘syllabus’ does not fit with the teaching strategy, though each module does have a set of specific learning outcomes that frame the content. It is obvious that new students have come from a background in which the ‘syllabus’ is defined. The A level syllabus and teacher guidance notes set the boundaries of acceptable testing for the examiner. In Higher Education the module specification is only the minimum needed to pass. The difference in syllabus expression from the maximum a candidate needs to know to the minimum they need to know is

profound and academic staff take it for granted that it is well understood. Likewise, the desire for consistency is interesting, in that the School's view would be that the modules are generally structured in the same way, but the detailed format of delivery is tailored to the subject matter. The timing of deadlines is a recurring theme. As far as possible these are mapped to prevent major clashes and this exercise was done for the year of this study. Furthermore, the students are given several weeks to complete most pieces of work and told that they need to plan their work schedule to manage their time effectively. Guidance on how to do this is provided in the first semester Study Skills module and additional advice is available from the Student Learning Centre.

Study Strategies

Poor study strategies were not given as a reason for failure. Lack of preparation, lack of time available and lack of interest in subject content were typical reasons, but the way that students revised was not given as a reason by any student. However, there were six students who had changed their approach as a result of failing (compared to students who just put in more study time or did not plan to make any changes). The changes made were either a move from passive to active revision strategies and/or switching to an on-going review of content throughout the modules. Given that the students were given guidance about the benefits of these approaches in the first semester Study Skills module, it suggests that some students needed the motivation of failure to change their approach to study, despite being urged to adopt these strategies prior to the first examination.

Social Conditions

There was no common pattern in students' prior social background (i.e. from a widening participation background) or their social experiences whilst at university. Amongst some students there was an acknowledgement that they needed to reduce socialising in order

to have more time to study. This reason, however, was subsumed under the broader category of the first year not counting towards the degree, therefore allowing a more active social life.

At Risk Groups and Pre-emptive Support

Students for whom English is a foreign or second (or, in the case of interviewee 12, a third) language experienced problems that were not easily resolved. There were only three students interviewed who were from non-UK backgrounds and only two of these referred to language as being the main problem. However, the nature of their language problems was significant. Both students expressed the greatest concern about the transition to studying at degree level because their prior experience did not prepare them for the challenges they faced. Both felt that language problems prevented them from keeping up with the content in the lectures and reported that they did not understand much of the module content. It is reasonable to conclude that non-native speakers of English are potentially at risk of failure if their English language skills are not adequate for the purpose of studying degree level content. Such students would benefit from early diagnosis and would require continued support to overcome the language problems.

The majority of students reported that they would turn to friends as the first source of support. Some students expressed a reluctance to approach staff with minor problems. Even those who were confident in speaking with staff still used friends as the first source of advice. As suggested by one student, peer support for first years could be a useful way to support students when their help seeking strategies focus primarily on their peers. It is probable that ‘good advice’ not acted upon when given by staff (e.g. the lecture on active revision techniques) might be better received from second or third year students.

Student mentoring might also assist students experiencing language problems and having difficulties communicating with native

speaking students. By pairing non-native speakers, it may be possible to reduce the isolation that can be experienced by students whose language skills are causing problems. A fellow non-native speaker is more likely to identify with the problem and be able to share coping strategies. Finally, it is possible that peer support would be a way of staff being alerted to early problems with students who would not otherwise come forward for help.

PROPOSED FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

The project was limited by the number of students who participated: firstly, fewer students failed components of the course this year compared with the previous years but also the take-up was not very good despite the added incentive of offering individual support from the Student Learning Centre. In retrospect a more pro-active recruitment strategy might have been beneficial.

We are looking at some of the issues raised: for example the School is planning to establish a Peer Support system for the coming academic year.

CONTEXT

University of Leicester	
Course title	Biological Sciences
Size of intake	85
% mature	7%
% living at home	10%
Relevant entrance data	BBB at A2, 300 points
Retention data	90%

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APPENDIX 1: List of Questions Used in Interviews

Phase one interview following Semester One examinations

- Did the examination results come as a surprise to you?
- Why do you think you failed the examination/s?
- Do you have any family members who have been to university?
- Was Leicester your first choice?
- Do you find studying at university different from studying at school or college?
- Was the subject content different from school or college?
- How was your time spent in the first semester? (Time spent on independent study, paid work, extra curricular activities, domestic responsibility)
- How confident are you about future examinations?
- Where did you go for advice and support in the first semester?
- Do you remember the Looking after You leaflet?

Phase two interview following Semester Two examinations

- What were your examination results like for Semester Two? Were you happy with them? Were they what you expected?
- Why do you think they were different from/the same as Semester One? (Did you approach your examination preparation differently?)
- What other aspects of your second semester were different from semester one? (Time spent on independent

study, paid work, extra curricular activities, domestic responsibility)

- How confident do you feel about starting your second year?
- What experiences have you gained from your first year that you think will be useful in helping you to succeed in your second year?
- Do you intend to make any changes to your approach to study for your second year?
- Looking back over the first year, what do you think were some of the best ways in which the School supported you? Where do you think the School could make improvements?

APPENDIX 2. Student Profiles ('English' denotes that the student is a native English speaker)

English	January	June	Sept.	Comments: Why did they fail?
	(Mean Mark)	Modules Failed		
YES	(37) 4	Passed		Wake up call – improved thereafter
YES	(45) 1	Passed		Wake up call – improved thereafter
YES	(46) 3	Passed		Did not know what was expected
NO	(32) 3	(35) 2	(39) 2	Language problems
YES	(57) 1	Passed		Did not know what to expect
YES	(48) 1	Passed	Passed	Did not enjoy those modules
YES	(41) 3	Passed		Lack of preparation – settling in socially was difficult
NO	(54) 2	(55) 1		International student found it hard to find time to revise
YES	(51) 1	Passed		Failed due to lack of revision but 'it made me work harder'
NO	Passed	(29) 4	(28) 5	Lack of experience of examinations and language problems
YES	Passed	(50) 1		Just aimed for a pass but working harder now
YES	Passed	(52) 2		Just aimed for a pass but doing OK now
YES	Passed	(57) 1		Did not like that specific module

APPENDIX 3: Selection of Commentaries on Students' Responses to Key Areas (13 students)

Pre-university experience		
<i>No.</i>	<i>Family experience of Higher Education?</i>	<i>Experienced Differences?</i>
1	No	No – from a college where independence encouraged. Saw Higher Education as similar apart from large lectures. Felt content. Built on existing knowledge apart from Biochemistry.
2	Yes	Yes – from sixth form. Big difference experienced 'was used to having my teachers driving me forward'. Content that would have been covered over weeks was given in one lecture.
3	Yes	No – from a college where there was not so much individual attention. But there is a lot more content to deal with.
4	Yes, sister at University in China	Yes – very different from foundation course. Size of lectures makes it difficult to ask questions. Language is the main problem, not keeping up with content at all.
5	Yes	Yes – from a school. Biggest change – size of classes. Did not feel confident asking tutors so "just got on with it myself".
6	Yes	Yes – from sixth form college. Misses the lack of individual attention and personal encouragement and having someone to make her do the work. A lot more content in a much shorter time.
7	Yes	No – from sixth form. Lectures were bigger but tutorials were a place to ask questions.

Student Transition And Retention (STAR)

8	Yes	Yes – spent a year at university in Portugal, more coursework here and better organised. Academic content is as expected.
9	No	Yes – from a college. Big difference in lack of guidance, lack of interaction. All took some getting used to but feels adjustments have been made.
10	Yes	No – from school sixth form. Content followed on from A level. More emphasis on independent study but he adjusted okay – “learnt to be my own teacher”.
11	Yes	Yes – from a school sixth form, more self-study and not ‘spoon fed’. But there is a lot of structure. You are more on your own but adjusted okay.
12	No	Yes – previous experience in Denmark where all assessed by oral examinations (written only in mathematics and Danish). The classes in Denmark were smaller with more discussion and a lot of group work.
13	Yes, sister studied in school at Leicester	No – came from a sixth form college. Apart from having a lot of lectures (20 hours a week) not a big difference. Felt she had adjusted well. Jump from first to second year was bigger adjustment.

Initial experience		
<i>No.</i>	<i>Failure a surprise?</i>	<i>Why did you fail?</i>
1	Yes – very surprised. First experience of failure and embarrassed by it.	Accepted responsibility for failure due to lack of effort and poor approach. Admitted complacency and determined to do better.
2	No – aimed for just a pass, as does not count towards my degree.	Accepted responsibility; lack of preparation.
3	Do not know – was not sure what to expect.	Did not know how they would be different from A level. Did not know level of detail required.
4	No – realised in the examination he was going to fail.	Could not keep up with lectures (language problems). Did not understand and avoided the problem.
5	Do not know – did not know what to expect.	Did not know what could be left out. Notes were not very good as did not know what to make notes on.
6	No – did not enjoy the modules so found it hard to learn the material.	Felt that because she did not enjoy the modules, the information did not stick and she was not motivated to learn it. Different modules would make a difference.
7	No – knew I had not done enough.	Accepted responsibility, lack of preparation.
8	Yes – for one module, no for the one that I expected to do badly on.	Lack of time for revision. Went home to Portugal for holidays which made it difficult to find time.

9	Do not know.	Because of lack of interest in that module. Difficult to find time to revise over Christmas.
10	No – just aimed to pass and got what he expected.	Felt he got what he had put in – aimed just to pass. He was happy with that for both semesters.
11	Do not know – expected to pass but could have done better. Did just what it takes to pass because it did not go towards the degree.	Got carried away with socialising in the first term. It was a lot harder than I thought it would be. Passed but I could have done more. Did more work for semester two because I wanted to do better.
12	No – I was very ill when I did those examinations.	Because I was ill I did not have time to revise. Only revised for one week. Problems with medication made it difficult to work. I did not really understand the material and tried to just memorize it. For the September resits, was feeling very discouraged about continuing and so did not prepare for them. Feels that resitting the first year was the right choice.
13	No – only failed one module in second semester.	Had not enjoyed the module. Was asked to distinguish tissues in photographs and she ‘just could not get it’. Would have preferred not to do that module. Otherwise happy with examination results, though her aim was just to pass the first year.

Programme delivery		
<i>No.</i>	<i>Positive comments</i>	<i>Improvements?</i>
1	Blackboard. Practice tests. Tutorials.	Nothing in particular. Did not like all the Chemistry in the first semester.
2	Lecturers very helpful. Genetics module study sessions. Physiology revision session. Practicals – demonstrators very friendly. Blackboard. All handouts helpful.	Needed to know how much detail to go into for examination answers.
3	Enthusiastic lecturers.	Past papers on Blackboard to identify level of detail for examinations. Would use this to know what level of details required in notes made during the term.
4	Handouts.	Easier first term to give time to get used to things.
5	Short answer questions in examinations. Diagrams in booklets.	Past paper to see structure. Need to know level of detail to revise and help with making notes in lectures.
6	N/A	Have to arrange to see a tutor. Does not find them approachable and misses the lack of personal contact.
7	Tutorials. Use of the internet.	N/A
8	Well organised.	N/A
9	Likes e-mailing tutors. Tutorials. Genetics gave overview of each week and there was a folder with everything you need	Past paper so you can plan level of detail for revision. Modules should all be structured the same, the way they give information; types of practicals are also different. A syllabus that could be used as a revision checklist. Would be

	to know.	good to have this information in one list. Should be more tutorials.
10	Lecture notes.	Generally happy.
11	Mid term assessment was good.	Organise so deadlines from modules do not all come at the same time in second year. Not getting past papers was main problem. Did not know what to learn so had to try to learn everything. Has made society for peer support within the school based on what they would have wanted as first years.
12	Module booklets are good.	Breaks between lectures – just five minutes to give you time to get from one session to the next. Biological Society for peer support. Past papers in the library. Help session at 4.30 is bad timing when she wanted to be able to attend but had to get home for children.
13	Handouts for lectures. Mock examination paper from one module.	For her course, having to do tissues module was not helpful in her second year. The first year module in Physiology would have been better for helping with content of second year. Also, rather than e-mailing tutors to arrange a time, it would be better if tutors gave a time when the students' were not timetabled when they could drop in to see the tutor. Benefits from discussing work with other students. Using the group work area in the library but it would be better if time and space was set aside within the School. Need to have past papers otherwise you are 'going in blind'.

Social Conditions		
<i>No.</i>	<i>Broader first year experience?</i>	<i>Where did you go for advice?</i>
1	No paid work. Settled in well, recognises too much socialising in first term.	Asked lecturers a few times but prefer to figure it out with textbooks.
2	Very busy with social/sporting activities/went home most weekends.	Asked friends on the course. Embarrassed to ask leading experts simple questions.
3	Very busy with sporting and club activities.	Friends on the course and in the second year.
4	Admitted that he did not spend a lot of time studying. Reported sleeping a lot more than usual without knowing why he did this.	Friends on the course but reported it was difficult to communicate with other students due to language problems.
5	Enormous amount of time spent travelling. Due to family circumstances had to live with family in Leicester. Also paid work few evenings a week.	Friends or study textbooks. Very nervous about asking staff.
6	Went out a lot in first term but 'calmed down' after that. No paid work or other activities.	Had a particular friend on the course and helped each other.
7	Did not settle in well. Meeting new people was difficult. Goes home twice a month. First three weeks were really difficult. Started doing 12	My personal tutor.

	hour part time work, but now quit so there is more time for study.	
8	Settling into another country was very difficult, first three weeks especially.	Other students. Having met personal tutor would be happy to go there if problems arose.
9	From Leicester, found it easy to make friends.	E-mailed tutors and lecturers with simple questions; happy to go and see them if needed.
10	Sport predominated and work was fitted around associated training, matches and socialising.	Friends in the house or nearby who were on the course. Particularly got support for mathematics from them.
11	Lots of going out in first term but 'calmed down' in second term. Did two hours of work most nights. No paid work.	Biological Science office, but did not have many questions. But could ask lecturers and had their e-mails and I used that. They are quick to get back to you.
12	Have three children. Spent minimal two hours but often four or five a night, because writing took so long. Is aware that all tasks take her a lot longer than other students. English is a third language. No paid work.	Personal tutor. Unlike the majority of students, remembers the 'Looking after You' leaflet very well and referred to it a lot.
13	No part-time work. Went out a lot in second term once friends had been made. No problems settling in overall.	Friends in the first instance. If still stuck would ask lecturers.

Levels of confidence		
<i>No.</i>	<i>How confident are you about the future?</i>	<i>Changes from semester one to two?</i>
1	Not doing well in Semester one provided motivation to do better subsequently.	Switched from passive to active revision techniques and recognised the need for this.
2	Failing was a 'kick up the bum' that was needed. Having passed Semester Two very positive about his second year.	Condensed notes using mind maps and very positive about this.
3	Quite confident; know what to expect and get to choose modules in second year.	No changes planned apart from expected to have to cut down on sporting activities.
4	I think I can pass if I put more time into it.	Planned to put more time into studies.
5	Quite confident.	Changed part-time evening work to weekends only to give more time to study, but otherwise the approach will be the same.
6	Confident that she can make the right changes to succeed. Now knows what is required in the examinations.	Identified that she needs to review her notes throughout the term, set more time aside for revision.
7	I know where I went wrong so hope it will be okay.	Need to start revising early.
8	Because more time available for revision over	I have to put more time into revision and that should be sufficient.

	Easter expects to do better.	
9	Confident because knew where problem lay and made her work harder. Also more time to revise at Easter.	Plans to get more organised, start work earlier to avoid rushing at the last minute.
10	Okay so far.	Due to increase in sports, even less time for study. Making better use of handouts for lectures. Makes best use of time with a specific routine that he sticks to and seems to be okay so far.
11	Second year is harder, lots of assessment.	Staying on top of things and doing things straight away so you are ahead of the deadline. Writing up lecture notes after each lecture.
12	Not really that much better this year. Understanding is still a problem, misunderstanding occurs. Practicals, essays and presentations are better but concerned about examinations; they are so different from her education in Denmark.	Repeating first year. Recognises she tried to memorise rather than understand last year. Still struggles with writing due to language problems and experiences frustration in not being able to express ideas in English easily. Difficult to memorise names of plants and animals, etc. I am not sure what I have to understand and what I need to know, level of detail is a concern. Is seeing personal tutor in first week of January to help prepare for examinations.
13	Would not ever say confident because she admitted to being quite stressed about work. But feels her second year is going well so far.	Revising throughout the term. Has put a significantly greater amount of time into studies this year, goes out a lot less.

The First Year Seminar: a Distant Solution to a Universal Problem

Anthony Cook, *The STAR Project, University of Ulster, Coleraine, Northern Ireland, BT52 1SA*

SUMMARY

First year seminars have been introduced into American University courses to enhance students' study skills, better integrate students into the institution and to enhance their life skills. They are considered to be a key factor in student persistence. In the UK modules supporting study skills are widespread but they do not address life skills, institutional commitment or social integration. The reasons for the differences are largely related to the contexts in which institutions and students operate. It is speculated that although the adoption of such modules may improve retention, there would be considerable cultural hurdles to overcome before they could be adopted in the UK.

Keywords: Retention, first year seminar, induction, study skills.

INTRODUCTION

Investigation of student unrest in the 1960s on American campuses led to the view that it was partly caused by students being distanced from the teaching institution and its staff. One result was a movement towards a greater engagement of students in educational processes and attempts by staff to address the educational needs of students in a holistic manner. From this arose the First Year Seminar (sometimes called University 101), a module that was designed to provide an extended induction to the university, independent living, and thinking and learning methods in Higher Education.

The First Year Seminar in American universities is held to be a significant contributor to increased student persistence (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Studies using students assigned randomly to participating and non-participating groups (Yale, 2000) as well as those using a time series analysis after the introduction of these seminars (Vinson, 1993) have shown significant improvements in student persistence. Given that student retention is a growing problem in the UK, it is worth examining these courses and questioning why they have not been introduced on a larger scale in UK institutions.

WHAT IS A FIRST YEAR SEMINAR?

These modules represent one or two hours per week of contact time with associated directed study and activities. The number of modules taken by American students is not determined by regulation but 30 contact hours per week appears to be a reasonable student load. Thus the first year seminar might represent about 1/15th of that load and equates to about 80 effort-hours (eight credits) in the UK system. The modules adopt deliberately small class sizes with large cohorts being divided up into sections of no more than 20-25 students. The topics studied vary considerably and are less important than the interactions between students and between staff and students that the module engenders. Reviews of such modules conducted by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience indicate that the first year seminar is offered at least as an optional course at the majority of postsecondary institutions (Barefoot and Fidler, 1992; National Resource Center, 1998).

Internet searches of American university curricula allow snapshots of the variety of forms. For example at Trinity College, Connecticut, 39 staff each offer a 'freshman seminar' with topics as varied as: Curiosity and Madness in English Literature; Crime and Punishment;

Highlanders: Peoples and Cultures of the Himalayas; The Public and Science Policy; Sense and Nonsense (Anon, 2005).

At Marietta College in 2003 there was a single subject and the module rationale includes the following statement:

“The academic component of this section of the class uses the study of space exploration as a model of how to succeed at various classroom tasks – note taking, critical reading, discussion, quiz and test-taking, paper writing, giving presentations, etc. At the same time, the subject matter itself – Space Exploration – will be a valuable resource for helping you learn about yourself and how you explore new worlds – i.e. college. In addition, the history of American space exploration is a window into the life experiences and values of several generations of Americans – the ‘greatest generation’, the ‘baby boomers’ and even ‘generation X’. What does it have to say about your generation and the world you are moving into?”

McShaffrey (2003)

The University of South Carolina has had a University 101 course since 1972 at which time both the course and an associated staff development programme for those who teach on it were introduced. It has since grown until, in 2004, 80% of new students enrolled on one of its 113 sections. Different sections cater either for different student groups (e.g. commuting students, students in halls) or different subject groups. As befits a course with such a broad clientele the curriculum is not specified other than that it must contain specific elements such as:

- Regular writing and note-taking;
- Oral communication skills;
- Use of the Library;

- Required examinations;
- Sex and the college student;
- Violence/alcohol-drug presentation;
- Career planning;
- Computer and technological competency; and
- Community service.

The goals of these courses are extensive and include many familiar study skills similar to those that can be seen in the STAR case studies (e.g. Cook *et al.*, 2006). In addition, however, it also aims to inform students about health and well-being issues, to acquaint them with the history and philosophy of the university and its support services as well as to meet a number of social goals such as making friends, their attitude towards staff and participating in service learning. The assessment is designed to practice those skills that will be required in other parts of the programme and to provide feedback so that students can be secure in their appreciation of staff expectations.

The goals of these courses are not necessarily to convey subject content but to use a content with which students are already familiar or in which they have expressed an interest to develop those skills and attributes that will sustain them through the rest of the course. In taking a holistic view of the life of a student these modules include support for social integration and the acquisition of life skills as well as academic development. Their introduction has been controversial with key issues being whether such a course should be compulsory in year one and whether it should be credit bearing.

WHY HAVE WE NOT EXPERIMENTED WITH THESE COURSES IN THE UK?

In the STAR survey of practice in Bioscience departments (Cook, 2006) and in informal discussions there has been no evidence of centrally promoted, credit bearing modules which seek to promote the social integration of students and the development of their skills independent of academic content. Indeed the prevailing view would be that, unless such material is delivered in the context of the subjects that students came to study, it would not be taken seriously. There is no national movement promoting first year teaching equivalent to that based in South Carolina (National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at <http://www.sc.edu/fye/>). The closest parallel in terms of teaching we discovered was the ‘Study Skills in Higher Education’ module at Plymouth (Harwood and McLaughlin, 2006) but this lacks the explicit social and institutional dimension.

There may be a number of reasons why explicitly social and institutional goals are not a feature of modules in the UK system:

- Many university teaching structures were constrained rather than liberated by the introduction of modular schemes. Some courses are now devoid of free choices especially in year one. In many US institutions, in contrast, modular systems have led to a greater range of modules and choices for students. Such choice promotes the use of ‘electives’ that may be specified or recommended for some categories of student.
- In contrast to the ‘liberal arts’ philosophy of many American institutions that focuses on benefits to the individual (see Appendix 1), the UK tertiary education system has increasingly focused on notions of employability, i.e. benefits to society. This has led to a

narrow focus on employment related skills and content rather than a more holistic approach to education.

- The business philosophy of many UK university managements requires the maintenance of large first year classes in order both to reduce the class size in later years as the curriculum becomes even more specialized and to release staff for non-teaching activities.
- A common reaction of staff to the suggestion that room should be made in the curriculum for activities aimed at social goals is often that the curriculum is already overcrowded.
- Many UK students now study from home and the university has less of a social focus than hitherto.

There are, of course, some exceptions and the STAR project has identified a number of practices that, while they do not amount to modules on the American pattern, recognize and attempt to attain social goals alongside the development of academic skills. Elements of the social inductions in Sheffield (Lineham, 2006) and Manchester (Sheader and Richardson, 2006) as well as the field based activities at Plymouth (Pearce and McLaughlin, 2006) and Ulster (McLaughlin *et al.*, 2006) all represent attempts to integrate students socially with the course team and their fellow students early in the course.

CONCLUSION

The module that aims to promote appropriate student life skills, engender a community spirit within the university and develop critical and analytical thinking skills is a common feature of American first year courses. It can be compulsory for some; it can be credit bearing; and its content can be fixed or variable. Although it

can be subject based this is not its key feature. It has been associated with improved retention statistics and is heavily promoted by a national organisation. In the UK, specific study skills modules are rare and that aspect of student development is more often integrated into subject specific modules. There appears to be less freedom in the UK to rebalance curricula in favour of those aspects of academic and social development that do not directly support the subject being studied. It is the social aspects of student development, in particular, that are most often kept strictly separate from academic modules and, although social ends may be achieved, they do not appear in formal university curricula.

Whether there are advantages in the UK of the adaptation and adoption of US style 'University 101' modules will have to await some trials and the empirical evidence that will hopefully accrue.

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APPENDIX 1. The Purposes of Higher Education

The Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) sought to define the purpose of Higher Education in the context of assessing how the sector could best achieve those purposes. It highlighted four aspects of activity summarized below:

1. The development of the individual;
2. The increase in knowledge and understanding both for its own sake and its application;
3. To serve the needs of a knowledge-based economy; and
4. To shape a democratic, civilized, inclusive society.

The mission statements of individual universities reflect this approach. Thus:

Northumbria:

“To meet the diverse needs of an international learning community and to contribute to society and its economic development through research, excellent teaching and high quality student support.”

Paisley:

“An international, innovative and inclusive university; committed to excellence in teaching, research and knowledge transfer; and to serving the social, cultural and economic needs of the communities of the west and south-west of Scotland.”

Manchester:

“The University shall further the prosecution of original research and shall be a teaching, assessment and awarding body. Its objects shall be to advance education,

knowledge and wisdom by research, scholarship, learning and teaching, for the benefit of individuals and society at large.”

Ulster:

The University will strive to:

“Preserve and advance knowledge and enrich social, cultural and sporting life through teaching, learning, research and knowledge transfer; provide teaching of the highest quality and encourage learning that will meet the personal and occupational needs of society; contribute to wealth creation and economic prosperity through teaching, research and technology transfer; stimulate enterprise and creativity and promote awareness of the forces of global change, nurture the values of inclusive citizenship and respect for diversity.”

Brighton:

“The University of Brighton seeks to: discover, test and apply knowledge effectively, creatively and responsibly; be an accessible, dynamic and responsive community of higher education, enhancing lives, communities, disciplines and professions; and secure the best possible outcomes for its students, staff and partners.”

American universities also have mission statements but some tend to reflect greater concern with the needs of individuals and public service.

The University of Kentucky:

“A public, research-extensive, land grant university dedicated to enriching people’s lives through excellence in teaching, research, and service.”

Quinnipiac University:

“A supportive and stimulating environment for the intellectual and personal growth of undergraduate, graduate, and continuing education students.”

The University of South California:

“The central mission of the University of Southern California is the development of human beings and society as a whole through the cultivation and enrichment of the human mind and spirit.”

Cornell University:

“In keeping with the founding vision of Ezra Cornell, our community fosters personal discovery and growth, nurtures scholarship and creativity across a broad range of common knowledge, and engages men and women from every segment of society in this quest. We pursue understanding beyond the limitations of existing knowledge, ideology, and disciplinary structure. We affirm the value to individuals and society of cultivation and enrichment of the human mind and spirit.”

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STAR Glossary

Brian S. Rushton and **Anthony Cook**, *The STAR Project*,
University of Ulster, Coleraine, Northern Ireland, BT52 1SA

The work of the STAR project was initially hampered by a lack of a shared vocabulary among teachers in Higher Education. A small e-mail survey was conducted to determine the meanings associated with various terms and from this and the STAR case studies the STAR Glossary evolved. The STAR Glossary contains two sorts of term. *Normal terms* are those that have a minimal, shared but sometimes overlapping meaning and can be confusing. *STAR terms* refer to the sense in which the term is used within the writings of the STAR project. In addition we have added, for clarity, definitions of terms in common usage in the UK tertiary system but which have no special meaning within the STAR project.

Induction

This is a catch-all term for everything from registration processes through departmental and library tours, to briefing talks from academic staff regarding the nature of academic and related work and expectations and from university support staff regarding availability of services – e.g. welfare, careers, etc. It normally takes place prior to the start of formal teaching. In the sense that most see it as time limited it is an event or series of events rather than a process.

STAR Early Induction

We see induction as a process. It should be seen as a rite of passage – a series of achievements and events that facilitate the separation of new students from their previous circumstances and their acceptance of and by their new academic community. Information conveyed

during this process cannot be assumed later. Only social contacts with both staff and fellow students will persist.

STAR Extended Induction

Once induction is not perceived as an event, then its time dimension is redundant. Thus we need to communicate the idea that students can be introduced to new ideas and processes throughout their university career. We refer to this ongoing process as ‘extended induction’ and it may feature many times during a student’s university career, e.g. at the start of each academic year, prior to and after a period of work experience, on encountering new and different patterns of academic work, etc.

Orientation

The term ‘orientation’ is not often used and, when it is, it is either synonymous with, or a sub-set of, induction. Occasionally it refers to activities with international students. In the USA ‘orientation’ is synonymous with ‘induction’ in the UK. The term ‘induction’ is rarely used in the USA.

STAR Orientation

Since we see early induction as serving mainly social and academic development purposes, we need to ensure that the more mechanical details are addressed. Thus we see orientation as providing useful information such as campus geography, course structures, etc. To conceptualize induction and orientation as being separate is to recognize the necessity of both.

Study Skills

These include communication (verbal and written), information retrieval, note taking, time management, creating a study environment, stress management, revision strategies, plagiarism,

referencing, CV preparation, etc. There are a number of different models for the development of study skills. They can be developed in a dedicated module, in an independent tutorial support scheme or integrated within subject-based modules. They are often delivered and acquired implicitly with neither staff nor students necessarily aware of the developments occurring.

STAR Study Skills

We would not advocate a particular mode of delivery. All have strengths and weaknesses and their effectiveness probably depends on the attitudes of the teachers and learners involved. The key aspects, however, are to develop independent learning strategies, appropriate communication skills and a practical appreciation of the standards of work required in Higher Education. Study skills, no matter how delivered, should be made explicit to encourage students to reflect on and enhance their own development.

Tutorial

This is a confusing term.

The academic tutorial is a regular meeting of about one hour between staff and a small group of students (between one and ten but, most commonly, less than five). Students prepare work before a tutorial and time is devoted to a discussion based on that work. Tutorials are also used to encourage group work, to address remedial issues including study skills and to discuss returned assignments. There is no agreement about the meaning of 'regular' with some specified as being weekly but others being termly.

Personal tutorials serve a pastoral role and are extremely variable sometimes putting academic staff in the position of a counsellor (for which few have received formal training) or a broker between student and central services. They are irregular and led by student need.

STAR Tutorial

We advocate weekly tutorials with one member of staff meeting with fewer than ten students. Students should prepare work for the tutorial beforehand and this should be the focus of the activities. Tutorials should emphasize small group teaching techniques and be used to ameliorate the anonymity of students in large lecture classes. All present should essentially have the same status and role and thus the tutorial should be mainly student led. It is inevitable that staff will facilitate the session. Tutorials are a good vehicle for the development of appropriate student study skills and to share the standards expected of student work.

We reserve the terms ‘personal tutorial’ and ‘personal tutor’ to refer to sessions and roles related to pastoral care of students. They are normally one-to-one, irregular and increasingly include personal development planning. Staff should not be expected to perform roles for which they are not trained. Thus it is unreasonable to expect academic staff to undertake personal counselling or generic remedial teaching such as basic literacy and numeracy unless they are specifically qualified in the area.

Seminar

Seminars always involve a presentation followed by a discussion; they are more formal than tutorials. Beyond this, however, there is little agreement on what constitutes a ‘seminar’. The session can be led by staff or by students; the group size can be from the whole module (100+) to a small sub-set (about ten).

STAR Teaching Seminar

For the concept of a teaching seminar to have any utility it must in practice lie between a lecture (staff-led presentation to the whole student group) and a tutorial (student-led discussion with a small group). In the context of teaching in Higher Education therefore, we

view a seminar as a session led by one or more students. There is a differentiation of role between those presenting and answering questions and those in the audience. The subject matter for a teaching seminar may be very varied and may include literature reviews, critiques, results and discussion of practical and project work, debates with students arguing different points of view, and so forth.

This should not be confused with a ‘research seminar’ which is a short lecture often followed by discussion.

OTHER CONFUSING NOMENCLATURE

The UK Educational System

Secondary Education Education is compulsory in the UK until the age of 16. Secondary education is the component of the compulsory period from the age of 11 to 16 AND a further optional two years to 18. The final optional years are largely used to qualify for university entrance by undertaking a variety of nationally recognised qualifications.

Tertiary Education Tertiary or third level education is synonymous with Higher Education.

Further Education Further Education (often abbreviated FE) is taken to mean education for people over 16, usually excluding universities and commonly in colleges of Further Education. Many courses are used as entry qualifications for Higher Education but many Further Education courses are vocational in nature and lead directly to employment.

Higher Education Higher Education (HE) is generally thought of as learning at level four and above (see 'Level' below). HE provision in the UK is in universities and university colleges. There is a more limited provision of HE in some FE colleges. In particular, Foundation degrees (two year non-Honours courses) are commonly delivered in FE colleges.

The Organisation of Teaching

Module An organisational unit of learning. Module outcomes are defined in module descriptions and module size is defined in terms of credit points.

Course A generic term denoting a series of modules leading to an award. Degree programmes are a subdivision of courses.

Term A period of attendance at university. Terms normally alternate with holidays.

Semester An organisational unit of time. Modules may be organised into semesters.

Workshop A workshop integrates practical activities and discussions. They are normally tightly focused on the acquisition of particular skills. There are usually a moderate number of participants (less than 30).

Practical Practicals are designed and led by academic staff. They involve students in practical activities designed to develop investigative techniques specifically related to the subject of the course of study. The number of participants is limited only by the facilities.

- Feedback* Student feedback relates to information from staff to students on the strengths and weaknesses of student work. It is associated with assessment used in a formative role (see 'Formative Assessment' below).
- Evaluation* Student evaluation relates to information from students to staff on the strengths and weakness of the work of staff. It may be gathered by questionnaire, by formal committee structures or by informal forums.
- Assessment* In the UK assessment is the outcome of the activities designed to assess student achievement. In the USA and elsewhere assessment refers to measures of student attributes.
- Level* An indicator of relative demand of learning and of learner autonomy. In general, level one is an introductory level, level three is appropriate for school leavers (i.e. university entrance) and level six for graduates. Levels have been defined and a common system agreed by **CQFW** (Credits and Qualifications Framework for Wales Project), **NICATS** (Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System), **NUCCAT** (Northern Universities Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer) and **SEEC** (Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer).
- Credit* Credit is a measure of the size of a piece of teaching. In the UK one credit point equates to an expected 10 hours of student effort. Modules are commonly of 10 or 20 credits (100 or 200 student effort hours). Credit is allocated at different levels (see above); hence a piece of teaching will be assigned credit at a particular level, e.g. 20 credit points at level 3.

<i>Learning outcomes</i>	Statements of what a student needs to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate. The learning outcomes for a module or a course state the minimum requirements to pass.
<i>Assessment criteria</i>	Description of what the learner is expected to do, in order to demonstrate that a learning outcome has been achieved.
<i>Formative assessment</i>	Assignments set in such a way that students learn from them. This is mainly through a staff critique of student performance.
<i>Summative assessment</i>	Assignments designed to test the extent to which students have achieved the intended learning outcomes. Summative assessments contribute to an end-of-module mark. Confusingly summative assessments (i.e. they contribute to the final module mark) may be used formatively (i.e. they are commented upon with the intention of improving student performance).
<i>Good practice</i>	Good practice is used to refer to teaching activities which are fit for purpose, i.e. achieve that which is intended. ‘Best practice’ is not a concept used by the STAR project since it implies that there is no room for improvement.
<i>Best practice</i>	
<i>Transition</i>	Educational systems do not change gradually as student progress through them. There are step changes in practice between, for example, institutions (particularly secondary to tertiary). Students at these points are said to be in transition.

Qualifications

<i>Honours degree</i>	Most degrees in UK are awarded with ‘Honours’. Such degrees are classified into first class Honours (commonly and average mark of 70% or more), second class Honours (between 50% and 70%) and third class Honours (between 45% and 50%). The second class is divided into upper (between 60% and 70% and lower (50% to 60%) divisions.
<i>Non-Honours degree</i>	Non-Honours degrees are of lower status than Honours degrees and unclassified. They are, however, of a similar duration. They may have been deliberately entered and completed by a range of students or they may have been awarded as a result of a failure to reach the standard required for an Honours classification.
<i>Foundation degree</i>	This new form of degree is work based and commonly taught outside universities in colleges. It is of two years duration and is equivalent in level to the first two years of an Honours degree.
<i>Top-up degree</i>	This has no formal status. One of the criteria for running a foundation degree is its articulation with a cognate Honours degree. A graduate from a foundation degree should be able to progress seamlessly to an Honours degree. Some courses are offered on which such students form the majority of the clientele. These have become known as ‘top-up degrees’. They can also cater for students (especially international students) with other backgrounds, but appropriate qualifications.

Admissions

<i>Widening participation</i>	This refers to a UK government policy, which encourages universities to recruit students from a broader social background. It is measured as the proportion of students coming into an institution from traditionally under-represented groups (some ethnic minorities, lower socio-economic groups, etc.).
<i>AVCE</i>	Advanced Vocational Certificate in Education. These are qualifications at level three (end of secondary education) which have strong relevance to the world of work. They are often assessed using portfolios. Many students whose main qualification is an AVCE will have limited experience of formal examinations.
<i>GNVQ</i>	General National Vocational Qualifications are being phased out by 2007. The successor qualifications are known as BTECs.
<i>BTEC qualifications</i>	Business and Technical Education Council Qualifications are offered at Foundation (level two) and Intermediate (level three).
<i>A level</i>	Most students use A level as their entrance qualifications into tertiary education. They are at level three and other qualifications are considered in relation to them. A levels are normally assessed by formal, regional examinations supplemented by a small contribution from coursework.
<i>Open days</i>	Visits organised on a university-wide basis during which subjects present course information to prospective students.

Visit days These are open days normally organised at a course or subject level for students who have applied for places.

UCAS points With the variety of entry qualifications now being offered it was not obvious how to compare them or indeed how to sum them. UCAS (University and College Admissions Service) has formalized the relationship between these qualification by assigning each grade of each qualification a number of tariff points which indicates its value for university entrance.

Highers In Scotland and the Republic of Ireland the normal university entrance qualifications are known as Highers. In Scotland they are properly known as Higher National Qualifications and are roughly equivalent to A levels although students take more of them and, therefore, are generally assumed to be less demanding. There are also Intermediate National Qualifications that contribute to university entrance requirements.

Student Progression

The student experience This may seem obvious but this phrase is increasingly being used to identify what institutions offer students (particularly in year one) and interpolated into that which is experienced by students.

- Student centred learning* An overused phrase which properly implies that that which is learned is constructed by students in circumstances in which the lecturer is a facilitator of learning rather than a presenter of information. It is the nomenclature of a constructivist learning philosophy. In practice, however, it more often implies that the teacher tells students how and where to access information and lets them get on with it.
- Condonement* Decisions relating to student progression are made on the basis of the average mark attained and the performance in each module. Given that the learning outcomes are the minimum required to progress, a fail in a module should be construed as having failed to meet all the learning outcomes. Nevertheless a fail in a module can be condoned provided it is allowed within local regulations and the average mark is above a pass mark. The extent of condonement is often limited to one or two modules.
- Retention* The Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) collects institutional data and publishes ‘performance indicators’. One of these is non-continuance and this is commonly referred to as retention. The HESA data refer to those students who completed the year of study and who had not left before 1st December of the year in question. Many student leave before this cut off date and the HESA statistics probably underestimate the actual numbers of students leaving

Skills

Study skills STAR Study skills have been discussed above. Generally speaking, it has become apparent that the skills required to do well in Secondary Education are not necessarily the same as those required to excel in a tertiary environment. Study skills therefore have become a generic term for those skills which need to be supplemented at university, viz., research skills, note taking, reading, listening and numeracy.

Transferable skills A set of skills which whilst acquired in one context are useful in others. Literacy, numeracy and people skills are common transferable skills.

Key skills Key skills are a range of essential skills that underpin success in education, employment, lifelong learning and personal development. They are defined by a government agency and assessed by the assembly of a portfolio of evidence. There are nationally assessed qualifications at four different levels in communication, application of number, information technology, working with others, improving own learning and performance, and problem solving. Whilst these key skills may have informed the development of many university courses it is rare for them to be formally assessed.

Core skills Core skills are similar to Key Skills but are applicable in Scotland. There are integrated into the Higher National Qualifications but can also be taken and assessed separately.

University Administration

<i>Vice-chancellor</i>	The head of a university. Often the VC will be an experienced academic who will lead the academic development of the institution devolving purely administrative decisions to heads of administrative departments.
<i>Pro-vice Chancellor</i>	A VC's deputy. Each PVC will often have a specific portfolio of duties, e.g. PVC (research), PVC (Teaching and Learning).
<i>Provost</i>	The role of provosts varies but it is a senior administrative post subordinate to that of Vice Chancellor. Provosts are commonly senior academic staff with specific responsibilities, e.g. for a particular campus of a multi-campus university.
<i>Dean</i>	The Dean is the administrative head of a faculty.
<i>Faculty</i>	A Faculty is an organizational sub unit of a UK university. It is commonly based around a single subject (e.g. science) or theme (e.g. health science). Faculties are often subdivided into Schools or Departments. Confusingly, some universities use the term 'school' synonymously with 'faculty'. Students probably identify with schools or departments and not with faculties.

University Administrative Processes

Registration Registration is an administrative process, which registers new students as members of the university, enrolls them for modules and collects fees. It is commonly conducted prior to the start of formal teaching giving rise to a pre-teaching week – ‘registration week’. A modern trend is for students to register on-line thus diminishing the opportunities for interaction with fellow students and with staff at this time.

Matriculation Students formally matriculate by proving that they have the required entry qualifications for the university. In some older universities matriculation is a formal ceremony at which students are formally welcomed to the university and their names registered as members.

Miscellany

FTEs Full Time Equivalents. This is an accounting measure that allows full-time and part-time students to be added together. It also applies to staff.

Full-time Full-time students in the UK are expected to complete 360 credits per year (the equivalent of working a 40-hour week).

Part-time Part-time take fewer modules than full-time students and commonly are in full time employment. With the growth of student employment during term time the practical difference between the hours actually worked by full- and part-time students is diminishing although the administrative differences persist.

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Tony Cook (University of Ulster)

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Helen Richardson (University of Manchester)

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Steve Waite (University of Brighton)

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