Supporting Staff: Staff Development

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The STAR (Student Transition and Retention) Project

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The STAR Project

Student Transition and Retention

Supporting Staff: Staff Development

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Preface

The purpose of this booklet is to describe practices that have worked in some institutions to ease the stresses of students' transition into Higher Education and to help to improve retention. This is important because student retention has become a significant issue both for students and for institutions. Students waste valuable time and resources if they drop out from a university course in which they have invested their hopes and aspirations and institutions waste money and staff effort. Early withdrawal of students frustrates the purposes of all. It is, however, just the measurable component of a more general malaise. For every student who takes the decision to leave a course there must be many more who are *just* able to pass, who are *just* able to cope with the stresses of Higher Education and who are failing to reach their full potential. Equally, there will be students at university who should never have joined or who should have joined a different course. They might be too immature, too deficient in the basic skills required or their talents might lie in different directions.

Every institution that has highlighted student retention as a significant component of its strategies has investigated the causes of early leaving and most will have drawn similar conclusions. The STAR consortium was formed at a time when the generality of these causes was becoming apparent but the responses to them were less clear. The first action of the consortium was to list a set of outcomes that, if achieved, would contribute to the alleviation of problems associated with student transition. These we published as the *Guidelines for the management of student transition* (Cook *et al*., 2005). The consortium then identified practices that were likely to assist the achievement of the outcomes in the *Guidelines* booklet and researched them.

The STAR booklets, of which this is one, are small compendiums of practices that have worked in some institutions to ease the stresses of students' transition into Higher Education. Many have been shown to improve retention. Many are the practical expression of institutional policies. All are descriptions of the dedicated work of teaching and support staff in the Higher Education sector who have introduced, maintained or developed practices for the benefit of students. The practices are derived from three sources. First, some were identified through survey. These were researched by STAR staff and written in collaboration with practitioners. Second, some staff volunteered to write about their practices independently. Third, some new practices were introduced and some existing ones evaluated using funding provided by the STAR project. Most practices have been described by staff and then validated by students through questionnaires or focus groups. All the reports contained in these booklets have been refereed independently and then approved by the STAR Steering Group.

This booklet describes the practices in enough detail to allow others to adopt or advocate that practice in their own institutions. The practices, however, should not be considered as definitive. They work in the institutions in which they were implemented by the staff who implemented them and with the students who participated. They are unlikely to remain the same. They will almost certainly evolve further even in the institutions in which they have been described and, when adopted elsewhere, will need to be adapted to suit local conditions. They are, therefore, offered as foundations on which to build appropriate practices to suit the staff, the students and learning environments involved.

REFERENCE

Cook, A., Rushton, B.S., McCormick, S.M. and Southall, D.W. (2005). *Guidelines for the management of student transition*. University of Ulster, Coleraine.

Staff Development in Higher Education Institutions

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The STAR project activities and the STAR products have been aimed at those academic staff involved in teaching and non-academic support staff. In that sense all STAR products are staff development materials. The current booklet contains materials that have been specifically developed for use in staff development sessions. They can be supplemented by reference to resources that will remain on the STAR website (www.ulster.ac.uk/star).

Higher Education in today's society is rapidly evolving. Diversity exists in the variety of study programmes on offer and the types of students taking up places on these courses. Successful student retention at any institution is dependent upon the existence of an effective, two-way, collaboration between students and staff. Students, from the beginning, must display enthusiasm and commitment for their chosen programme of study. Staff are expected to continually adapt to the changing needs of their students. Academic staff and educational developers must seek to deliver appropriate curricula, gain expertise in student guidance and assess their own performance in managing student transition.

Unlike schools and Further Education institutions, teaching in Higher Education requires no formal teaching qualifications. Historically new teachers learned 'on the job' and this method of educational training was recognised by institutions but carried no formal certification. This procedure gave rise to teaching quality issues in relation to the validation and accreditation of teaching practices within Higher Education.

The lack of an agency or body to govern teaching in Higher Education led to the development of a ‘Teacher Accreditation Scheme’ in 1993, by the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA), UK. The overall aim of the Teacher Accreditation Scheme was “to assure a common and appropriate standard of performance of teachers in higher education who complete recognised programmes of training” (http://www.seda.ac.uk).

Modules developed by institutions with the aim of improving teacher performance may be accredited by SEDA which stipulates training outcomes and values, but not actual processes. This encourages variety in the types and forms of training methods submitted for approval. Successful completion of an accredited module results in the participating staff member becoming a ‘SEDA accredited teacher’. The scheme, therefore, represents a professional standard in Higher Education that acknowledges programmes of training and those staff that have successfully completed them. Completion of a SEDA accredited module demonstrates that the teacher has met the following eight objectives:

1. “Designed a teaching programme or scheme of work from a course outline, document or syllabus;
2. Used a wide and appropriate range of teaching and learning methods effectively and efficiently in order to work with large groups, small groups and one-to-one;
3. Provided support to students on academic and pastoral issues in a way, which is acceptable to a wide range of students;
4. Used a wide and appropriate range of assessment techniques to support student learning and to record achievement;

5. Evaluated their own work with a range of self, peer and student monitoring and evaluation techniques;
6. Performed effectively their teaching support and academic administrative tasks;
7. Developed personal and professional strategies appropriate to the constraints and opportunities of their institutional setting;
8. Reflected on their own and personal and professional practice and development, assessed their future development needs, and made a plan for their continuing professional development."

http://www.seda.ac.uk/accred/teacher/tacobj.htm

In the last few years many institutions have required new teaching staff to undertake a training course variously titled Postgraduate Certificates or Diplomas in University Teaching or Academic Practice or Teaching in Higher Education, etc. These courses were recognized and accredited first by the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education and then by its successor, the Higher Education Academy (HEA). Graduates are recognized by the Academy as "registered practitioners". Recognition by the HEA and SEDA are not mutually exclusive and many postgraduate awards accredited by the HEA are composed of modules accredited by SEDA.

The concept of staff development within the realms of academia translates into "anything that is done to enhance the knowledge base and skills of teaching staff" (http://www.ulster.ac.uk/staffdev/CPD/cdpmenu.html). As in any aspect of life, it is commonplace to practice an ideology of continual improvement and Higher Education is no different. The concept of 'continuing professional development' is an important facet of the Higher Education agenda and is applied within most staff development strategies. Modes of professional development are wide ranging and vary according to institution and individual preference. Types of professional learning include:

- Courses and conferences;
- Professional interactions;
- Networking;
- Consulting experts;
- Responding to student feedback;
- Personal research;
- Learning by teaching; and
- Learning by doing and reflection.

Becher (1996)

Professional learning is an inherent part of staff development and should therefore be: apparent at all stages of every academic's career; relate directly to institutional contexts; be actively supported by institutional structures and rewards; be self-directed and relevant to the needs of the individual; and create opportunities for collaboration (Johnston, 1998).

At its outset the STAR project researched, produced and published a set of guidelines based on the causes of student attrition and which pointed the way towards possible good practice. The STAR guidelines relevant to staff development are:

4.1 Proactive staff development strategies should be in place to support staff to develop appropriate curricula.

4.2 Staff should recognise that expertise in ensuring appropriate support and guidance of students is as important as expertise in their subject.

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 outcomes to others.

Cook *et al*. (2005)

Within the time frame of the STAR project it was not possible to deal with every resulting issue relating to staff development. Practical examples and general aids have instead been created to illustrate how the above guidelines can be implemented. Contained within the current booklet are two examples supporting staff development:

- Learning Through Audit: the STAR Transition Audit; and
- Staff Development Programme: Theory, Practice and Policies Relating to Dyslexia.

The STAR Transition Audit was designed as a checklist style tool that could be utilised to examine current practice. It covers the following aspects pertaining to the movement of students into Higher Education institutions:

- Prior to entry;
- Induction (during registration week);
- Advisors of study/tutors;
- The curriculum;
- Academic support;

- Student learning;
- Extra-curricular activities;
- Staff-student contact outside class;
- Administrative leadership; and
- Institutional research.

For each topic area the audit poses questions and answers, which are then scored on a scale of one to five. Aspects of practice scoring three or below are highlighted for review. While some questions may address problems that are not applicable or relevant, the audit actively encourages reflection and change as a consequence of colleague interaction and discussion. Identifying problematic areas and implementing improvement strategies helps to achieve continuing professional development.

At the University of Wolverhampton a staff development programme was generated to focus on the support of students with dyslexia. The overall aim was “to plan and develop an effective staff development programme in relation to dyslexia, to address the various contacts a student will have with staff in all areas prior to entry, on entry and on the programme” (Amesbury, 2006). The categories of staff targeted included academic staff, non-academic staff and staff in collaborative institutions.

Implementation of this study programme proactively responded to legislation such as the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA). Staff can therefore adjust to the new developments, thus ensuring “the rights of students with dyslexia to equal opportunities and fair access to Higher Education” (Amesbury, 2006).

The above examples serve to highlight the necessity for continuing development to ensure that staff remain abreast of all changes impinging upon Higher Education. This will inevitably lead to improvements in the quality and suitability of teaching methods which, in turn, will enhance student retention.

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Learning Through Audit: the STAR Transition Audit

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SUMMARY

In order to stimulate personal and group reflection on student transition issues an audit is presented consisting of over 60 questions divided into eleven separate sections: prior to entry, induction (during registration week), advisors of study/tutors, the curriculum, academic support, student learning, extra-curricular activities, staff-student contact outside class, administrative leadership, research and institutional culture. The audit is designed to be used as a staff development tool where discussion of the questions leads to the identification of good practice as well as practice that would be considered as inadequate for the purposes of supporting students through the transition to university from a school or college background. Unlike many audits the STAR audit suggests good practice so that users are also able to discuss how it might be possible to implement such good practice in their own organisation or to identify impediments. Users are encouraged to edit the audit to focus on their specific needs.

Use of the audit in a variety of scenarios with different mixes of people suggests that it is a very powerful tool for personal and group reflection and, as such, it would form a most suitable basis for any staff development programme that was focussing on issues of student transition.

Keywords: transition policy, transition practice, reflection, staff development, transition audit.

INTRODUCTION

Audit processes are generally viewed as mechanisms used in a managerial context to measure performance with a view to changes in policy and practice. In the context of Higher Education, however, audit tools are commonly used to allow individuals or groups to examine their own practice and as an aid to reflection (Hughes, 2006).

Usually an audit is composed of a series of questions (BioScience Subject Centre, 2006) with no indication of the criteria to be used to determine a score. This is appropriate in areas in which good practice is obvious or implied by the question. In unfamiliar areas, such as induction and retention, however participants need to be assisted. Thus the STAR transition audit also presents a series of graded responses. This is to support reflection and to provoke change in an area where many staff have not yet consciously practiced (i.e. they might not necessarily differentiate between good practice and common practice). The STAR transition audit therefore presents both questions and answers.

The audit addresses all aspects of student transition and retention based on the STAR *Guidelines* (Cook *et al*., 2005). In practice some of these may not be relevant for some groups in that they address problems that do not exist in their institution. Thus there is little point in including questions that address the needs of home based or mature students if their needs have never presented a significant problem. Therefore, the audit, as presented, is designed to be edited and tailored to suit the needs of each session.

This audit has been used extensively both by members of the STAR team and by others. Responses have been varied. Thus in one institution advice was given that it should not be used for a particular group since it would ‘frighten’ the staff; the implication being that good practice (a score of 5) was so far beyond current practice that it would be unlikely to be taken seriously. On the other hand the following comments have been received from other institutions:

> "*We used it to evaluate our current position within the University. It was useful in highlighting areas for investigation and improvement when possible but also good practice ideas*."

University of Wales, Newport

> "*The audit definitely increased my awareness of the many different issues related to transition and retention. I also like the idea of the scoring system, which allowed me to easily see what I might do in order to improve my practice*."

University of Ulster

THE STAR TRANSITION AUDIT

Questions

Select the answers that most closely resemble what you do in your institution and note the score in the end column.

Prior to Entry

1.1 *Do recruitment publications accurately portray the characteristics of the campus to prospective first-year students?*

Publications are viewed as marketing.	1
Publications give accurate but limited information.	3
Publications give a balanced view of student life. All course and module details are available.	5

1.2 *How much curriculum information is available to applicants?*

We have a written Prospectus and this is repeated on the web.	1
Each subject produces an information leaflet outlining the course structure and career prospects.	3
Applicants can access the full module descriptions and course structure from the web.	5

1.3 *When is the first year curriculum available to applicants?*

It is sent with joining instructions or at the time of enrolment.	1
An outline curriculum is available on the web and in the Prospectus.	3

		A detailed curriculum is publicly available on the web.	5
1.4	*Are campus visits explicitly encouraged?*		
		No.	1
		Campus visits restricted to large open days.	3
		Small open (visit days) days specific to subjects are arranged.	5
1.5	*How are the needs of parents and other family members met on advice or visit days?*		
		They are welcome to attend visit days.	1
		Parents can accompany their offspring for most activities.	3
		Parents are separated from the applicants and are given a guided tour and the opportunity to ask questions of students and staff.	5
1.6	*Are applicants interviewed?*		
		No, or they get a strict interview with no organised tours or meetings.	1
		Applicants have an informal meeting with staff with the intention of encouraging them to confirm their application.	3
		All students are interviewed and given the opportunity to participate in sessions designed to answer their queries accurately.	5

1.7 *How much contact is there between the institution and potential students between application and enrolment?*

We send them an offer and, if they achieve that, they get the joining instructions.	1
Potential students are sent regular information leaflets.	3
Each applicant is assigned a student who they can contact for information.	5

1.8 *How do you deal with students applying through clearing?*

We have an administrator who deals with clearing.	1
Academic staff deal with clearing applications but the emphasis is on filling the places.	3
Clearing students get good academic and careers advice from academic staff.	5

1.9 *Do recruitment practices give an accurate impression of life on campus?*

Visit days are organised out of term time.	1
Visit days are organised out of term time but student guides are employed to show prospective students around.	3
Visits days are organised in term time; students are used as guides extensively.	5

1.10 *How much information is available about Student Support Services?*

There are some general statements in the Prospectus.	1

Student Support leaflets are freely available.	3
Student Support Services are available at visit days and each produces its own leaflet explaining its function.	5

Induction (during registration week)

2.1 *Do you provide an initial induction that includes tours of the department/campus and meeting of academic and support staff?*

We let students explore the campus and department themselves and they meet staff as they teach them.	1
Department tour and introduction to the department by head.	3
Full campus and department tour and then a 'meet and greet' session with the academic and support staff.	5

2.2 *What percentage of students attend induction?*

<50%	1
50-90%	3
>90%	5

2.3 *Are student mentors involved in initial induction?*

Students not involved.	1
Untrained student guides are used for orientation to the campus.	3
Student guides trained and involved in small group activities.	5

2.4 *Are social activities organised for new students in induction week?*

No.	1
Yes, this is organised by the Students' Union.	3
Events are organised by the course to ensure that new students get to meet staff and their peers.	5

2.5 *Do parents/family members accompany students to registration?*

No, we do not invite them and they are not welcome.	1
We do not discourage them but do not officially invite them.	3
Yes, they are invited and there are separate activities for them.	5

2.6 *What subject specific matters are included in induction?*

We use a general induction that covers all the students in the school/faculty.	1
Our students get a lecture on health and safety issues.	3
We take our students off campus on a residential induction.	5

2.7 *To what extent do you induct students in course groups?*

All students entering the school/faculty are dealt with together.	1
Some events are arranged which are specific to courses.	3

Students on a course are brought together initially and we keep them together for most induction activities. 5

Advisors of Study/Tutors

3.1 *Does each student have a named advisor responsible for* pastoral care?

No. 1

They can see the course/year tutor with any problems. 3

Yes, they are officially assigned one at registration. 5

3.2 *Do you have an academic tutorial system responsible for students' academic development?*

No. 1

Yes, academic tutors are available and respond to student needs. 3

Yes, academic tutors are proactive in predicting students' needs and meeting them. 5

3.3 *On average how many first year students does an advisor of study have?*

>15 1

7-15 3

$\leq$ 6 5

3.4 *How frequently does a tutor meet his/her tutees?*

Each term.	1
Each month.	3
Each week.	5

3.5 *What procedures are there for students who wish to leave?*

We only find out they have left when the students fail to attend the examinations.	1
Students complete an exit form and leave it in the office.	3
Students normally have an exit interview at which their problems are discussed.	5

3.6 *What is the uptake of staff development for advisors of study?*

We do not have any staff development in this area.	1
Courses are available but few attend.	3
Most advisors would have received staff development.	5

3.7 *Do you have a PDP system?*

No.	1
Yes, students can construct one on line for themselves.	3
Yes, students are supported by a tutorial system to keep their PDP up-to-date.	5

3.8 *Before changing courses or modules is the student required to confer with and seek approval from an academic advisor?*

No, they can change modules or courses themselves.	1
They need to complete a form that is countersigned.	3
They need to discuss it and get an official form signed.	5

The Curriculum

4.1 *Does the first year curriculum contain opportunities for students to get an overview and rationale of the course?*

No, each module is self-contained.	1
This information is contained in the course handbook.	3
There is a detailed handbook and it is discussed with the students.	5

4.2 *Are students introduced to the assessment methods involved?*

Students learn how to complete assignments by completing them.	1
We do some dummy runs of some of the assessment methods.	3
Students are only formally assessed after they have the opportunity to practice.	5

4.3 *Is your assessment strategy designed to promote student independence?*

Students are expected to find and report on information from the outset.	1
We mimic A level as best we can in year one. Year two requires more independent research and reporting.	3
The assessment strategy models students' previous experiences at the outset but then increasingly promotes independence through year one.	5

4.4 *Does the first year curriculum reinforce students' vocational aspirations?*

The first year curriculum is formed from essential building blocks for future years.	1
We ensure that within the first year modules some of the examples used are appropriate for each of the degree programmes.	3
Contributions are made by practitioners to our vocational courses. Where appropriate we organise industrial visits.	5

4.5 *To what extent is your curriculum sensitive to diversity within your first year cohort?*

We just teach the same basics to everybody.	1
We have adjusted the curriculum to meet the needs of students as the characteristics of our new students have changed.	3
We have some choice in our first year so that students can construct a curriculum to suit their differing needs.	5

4.6 *Is the curriculum constructed to provide common group experiences for students enrolled on the same course?*

No, there is just a common uniform first year.	1
Common first year but individual elements are tailored to courses.	3
Core modules in first year are tailored to meet the needs of each student group.	5

Academic Support

5.1 *How do you identify the needs of non-traditional students (e.g. mature, ethnic minorities, undisclosed special needs)?*

Through failure.	1
Attendance is monitored.	3
Examining pre-entry characteristics and monitoring attendance and performance.	5

5.2 *Are students' basic academic skills assessed on entry? Are different experiences available for students with different skills?*

No.	1
Yes, diagnostic testing leads to different recommended modules.	3
Diagnostic testing is followed up by individual action and learning plans.	5

5.3	*Do you identify ‘at risk’ students?*	
	No.	1
	Yes, optional tutorials are available for weak students.	3
	Yes, advisors closely monitor their progress.	5
5.4	*Are Student Support Services highly visible to first year students?*	
	No.	1
	Advisors recommend students to visit Student Support.	3
	Yes, Student Support Services are proactive in seeking to help students at risk.	5
5.5	*Is there a peer-mentoring scheme available?*	
	No.	1
	There is a scheme but no training is involved.	3
	There is a formal system involving training of peer-mentors.	5
5.6	*At which stage do you identify the requirements of students with special needs?*	
	Within modules.	1
	Needs are assessed at enrolment and then support is put into place.	3
	The UCAS form triggers an existing protocol. Extensive liaison takes place with both academic and support staff.	5

5.7 *Do academic staff receive specific training to support students with special needs?*

No specific training given.	1
Training offered but up-take is poor.	3
Most academic staff would have received training.	5

5.8 *Do support staff (technicians and secretarial/clerical) receive specific training to support students with special needs?*

No specific training is given.	1
Training is offered but up-take is poor.	3
Most support staff would have received training.	5

5.9 *Who takes responsibility for recommending alterations to enable students with special needs to undertake a degree programme?*

We leave such matters to central services.	1
Technicians might give advice.	3
We involve central services, academic and support staff in discussion with the student to determine needs.	5

5.10 *Do you think the needs of students with special needs are met?*

Generally no; we could be more proactive.	1
Yes, but much of the support is ad hoc.	3
Yes, students are given a high level of support from initial application to graduation and we are proactive in determining needs.	5

5.11 *Do Student Support Services provide academic staff with diagnostic feedback that allows appropriate support to be given to students at risk?*

No, student support is confidential.	1
Yes, generic feedback is given.	3
Yes, detailed feedback is sent with student's consent.	5

Student Learning

6.1 *To what extent do you encourage students to reflect on the ways in which they learn?*

No explicit study skills support.	1
Study skills workshops focused on hints and tips.	3
Students use learning logs to promote student development and self-awareness.	5

6.2 *How do you promote the development of learning communities?*

No attempts are made to encourage the formation of support groups.	1
Group work is only used to increase the efficiency of practical classes.	3
Learning communities promoted (e.g. by group tasks, team building, etc.).	5

6.3	*How do you promote self-belief and academic confidence?*	
	Study advice and student support given in response to actual or impending failure.	1
	Study advice and student support given to all students as a remedial exercise.	3
	Study advice and student support given to communicate the expectation of success.	5
6.4	*How do you promote learner independence?*	
	Students are expected to learn independently because support is removed from all but the weakest.	1
	Learner independence is promoted by the provision of independent learning materials.	3
	Learner independence is promoted proactively by, for example, setting individual tasks and promoting learner self-awareness.	5
6.5	*How do you know when to offer support and to whom?*	
	No student tracking system in place. Advisors follow the progress of advisees when time permits.	1
	Student tracking system in place but is not linked to effective support.	3
	Tracking students’ performance and attendance is a specific responsibility linked to proactive support.	5

Extra-curricular Activities

7.1 *To what extent are students involved in campus life; e.g. campus employment; volunteering; student clubs and societies?*

There are very few extra-curricular activities.	1
Student participation is limited to student clubs and societies.	3
Students have a key role in non-academic events on campus.	5

7.2 *Are some extra-curricular activities designed to support any of the formal curriculum?*

No.	1
There is a subject-based society but it is not linked to the curriculum.	3
Yes, there is a subject-based society where events support the curriculum.	5

7.3 *Are social and work areas available for those who live off campus?*

No.	1
Limited space available for working between formal contact hours.	3
Yes, there are 24-7 resource centres and coffee bars.	5

Staff-student Contact Outside Class

8.1 *How available are staff to meet students outside formal contact hours?*

Students are always complaining about how difficult it is to find staff.	1
We get the occasional complaint about staff availability.	3
Students have complimented the department on how accessible the staff are.	5

8.2 *Are staff contact details available to students? E-mail addresses, phone numbers, etc.?*

No.	1
Details are restricted.	3
Yes, room number, phone number and e-mail available. Home contact details available.	5

8.3 *Are there intentionally planned programs or procedures that are designed to promote staff-student interaction outside the classroom?*

No.	1
Occasional events organised.	3
Regular staff-student social events are organised.	5

8.4 *Are academic staff involved in student clubs and societies?*

No.	1
Staff are often members of the clubs and societies.	3
Yes, staff involvement in running clubs ensures continuity.	5

8.5 *What procedures are there for ensuring that part-time teaching staff are available for student consultation outside class?*

None.	1
Staff are encouraged to make themselves available.	3
They have a shared office and timetabled access.	5

Administrative Leadership

9.1 *Does the Head of School make resources available for the support of first year students?*

No.	1
Staff involvement acknowledged and limited funding available.	3
Induction activity accounted as teaching hours and funding available for social events.	5

9.2 *Does the Head of School communicate the value placed on teaching activities?*

Hardly ever see him/her.	1
The Head of School does attend key meetings but contributes little. Some people may get support to attend some teaching and learning meetings.	3
Head of School regularly attends meetings on teaching and learning issues. Resources are available for staff involvement in teaching and learning developments.	5

Research

10.1 *Do you investigate the reasons why students leave?*

No.	1
Reasons for leaving recorded at time of withdrawal.	3
Post-withdrawal surveys are conducted and analysed.	5

10.2 *Do you know the nature of the qualifications that students enter with?*

No.	1
We get a list of new students with their qualifications.	3
We periodically review the specification of A levels, AVCEs and so on, so that we can appreciate what our students can do prior to entry.	5

10.3 *Are teaching and assessment issues viewed as proper subjects for investigation?*

No. Our research is all subject based.	1
We regularly monitor student results in the light of changed practices.	3
Some staff actively research their practices and publish their findings.	5

10.4 *Do you know what students expect when they join your courses?*

Yes, they expect an easy time and to be spoon-fed.	1
We carefully monitor staff-student liaison committee minutes to ensure all problems are dealt with.	3
We have surveyed our students/run student focus groups to find out how well our provision meets students initial expectations.	5

10.5 *Are satisfaction surveys of first-year students conducted to assess their perceptions of the quality of their first year experience?*

No.	1
Limited information is sent back to each department.	3
Yes, detailed information is fed back to each course and influences developments.	5

10.6 *Is the assessment of student satisfaction and student retention conducted with respect to different student subpopulations (e.g. commuters, ethnic and racial minorities, gender)?*

No.	1
Yes, limited information is gathered.	3
Yes, this information is gathered from a questionnaire and fed back to courses.	5

10.7 *What percentage of your students leave or transfer to other courses without failing.*

>15%	1
5-15%	3
<5%	5

Institutional Culture

11.1 *If you decided to change your induction practices what would it involve?*

It would need formal approval from a central committee.	1
I could just agree it with my Head of School.	3
I would try it out and report the outcomes to my school and if it looked effective it could be taken up by others.	5

11.2 *How could you get colleagues to cooperate with you to institute change?*

The Head of School would have to allocate staff time to it and persuade colleagues to participate.	1
One or two of my colleagues would leap at an opportunity to try out new things.	3
I know I would get widespread co-operation for change.	5

USING THE AUDIT – SOME PRACTICAL ADVICE

The audit has, in total, 66 questions spread over eleven different areas related to student transition and retention. Whilst the audit may be used very effectively for individual reflection on practice (thus allowing the individual to become a 'reflective practitioner' (Brown *et al*., 1999)), its strength lies in collaborative exchange of ideas, experiences and solutions. Using the audit with a number of groups of between 20 and 30 people has taught us the best way to proceed and the following advice might be useful for groups wishing to audit their own provision.

1. Adapt the audit to suit the audience. Questions might be inappropriate or accepted institutional common practice. Single sections can be used in short sessions to focus staff on particular areas of practice or particular problems. Questions and answers can be inserted purely to be provocative but be prepared for the ensuing discussion.
2. Divide the group into sub-groups of about four or five.
3. Allocate a set of cognate questions to each group. There is disparity between the eleven sections of the audit (from two to ten questions) but it should be possible to combine the sections sensibly to give an equal work-load.

4. Allow discussion for between one and one and a half hours; in this time period it should be possible to consider about eight questions – one of the longer sections by itself or two or three of the shorter ones.
5. Discussion will be enhanced by a diversity of staff within each group. The audit has been used with a very wide variety of staff including academic staff, academic-related staff, academic support staff, administrators, teaching support staff and so forth. Additionally, some groups have included staff from non-UK institutions and they have empathised with the situations described in the questions.
6. Allow sufficient time for feedback to be given to the whole group. Emphasis should be on:
    a. Identifying and disseminating good practice (i.e. those practices that would achieve a grade five – or even higher – on the scoring system); and
    b. Identifying and developing practice that would assist in changing provision that scored only grade one or three.

Allowing for introduction and extensive discussion and feedback a staff development session should take about two and a half hours.

CONCLUSIONS

The audit has been used with a variety of groups including a mix of different types of staff from a variety of institutions at a Higher Education Academy event and at the first meeting of the European First Year Experience at the University of Teesside as well as more homogeneous staff groupings at specific institutions. In all cases, the presentation of the audit and the discussion that followed has promoted mature reflection on practice and the identification of good (and not so good) practice.

The audit as presented here contains a wide selection of questions, not all of which need to be used on very occasion. A key to successful implementation as a valuable staff development tool, is the editing of the audit so that it is ‘fit for purpose’. The design of the audit is such that sections or parts of sections may be edited out easily; no one individual question depends on another. Further questions suited to particular institutions or events may be added as necessary. For staff wishing to use the audit for their own practice it is available in convenient table format from the STAR website (www.ulster.ac.uk/star).

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Staff Development Programme: Theory, Practice and Policies Relating to Dyslexia

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SUMMARY

Funding from the STAR project has enabled the planning of three staff development programmes aimed at assisting different categories of staff (academic staff, non-acdemic staff, staff in collaborative institutions) in their support of students with dyslexia. The resources are available on the STAR website (www.ulster.ac.uk/star).

Keywords: dyslexia, staff development programme, support staff, academic staff, collaborative partners.

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this project was to plan and develop an effective staff development programme in relation to dyslexia to address the various contacts a student has with staff in all areas prior to entry, on entry and on programme. The aim was to meet the needs of both academic and non-academic staff by encouraging colleagues in all areas to participate in creating a university environment that is supportive of students with dyslexia.

Since the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), the rights of students with dyslexia to equal opportunities and fair access to Higher Education have been highlighted. The DDA Part 4 recommends that staff in educational institutions receive training in understanding the characteristics of various disabilities. It suggests that they need to become aware of their duties in relation to making reasonable adjustments for disabled students and must recognise that such students should not be treated less favourably than their non-disabled counterparts.

This project draws on previous research that involved seeking feedback from students with dyslexia at the University of Wolverhampton to highlight the main areas where staff needed to develop a greater understanding of dyslexia.

METHODS

The content, delivery methods and structure of the staff development programme were clarified by gathering data from three main sources:

- The experiences of students with dyslexia, gathered from previous research;
- The recommendations within relevant literature and legislation; and
- The professional expertise and experience of the project team.

An analysis of staff development issues was conducted based upon information provided by students with dyslexia who had been interviewed individually and who had participated in focus groups. This involved examining comments relating to their support and experience as a student with dyslexia. Common themes were identified relating to all aspects of their experiences within the University in order to specify areas that should be addressed via the staff development programme.

Relevant literature was examined to determine best practice for the formation of an inclusive and accessible learning environment for students with dyslexia. This involved consulting a range of available books and journal articles on dyslexia as well as an examination of current legislation and web-based disability advice.

The project team discussed various aspects relating to the practical implementation of the staff development programme. The target audience was identified and decisions made on how this could be sub-divided to include individual professional development needs through separate delivery mechanisms. This led to the identification of specific sessions and a clarification of the length of time that would be devoted to the delivery for each professional target group.

The content of each session was clarified by examining the nature of contact each target group was likely to have with students with dyslexia in relation to the demands of their professional roles. A distinction was made in terms of the knowledge requirements of each target group in the following areas:

- Theories of dyslexia;
- Legislative requirements (e.g. SENDA, Data Protection Act);
- The identification of dyslexia;
- Pre-entry disclosure of dyslexia;
- Best practice for teaching and learning (e.g. lecture delivery, assessment methods); and
- Support mechanisms (e.g. funding procedures, additional support provision).

Once appropriate content was identified, the structure of each session was clarified and effective delivery methods discussed and selected. There was a clarification of any further training needs amongst the project team in relation to the successful delivery of this programme.

Appropriate methods of delivery were also discussed and the project team agreed that the programme should reflect current best practice guidelines for teaching and learning. Thus it was agreed that a range of activities should be included to reflect the preferences for different styles of learning. PowerPoint was identified as the preferable mode for delivering presentation-based aspects of the programme, exploiting the multimedia capabilities of this software where possible. However, the project team believed that to achieve desired learning outcomes for the participants on the course, the focus of the training sessions would need to be experiential and collaborative.

Time restraints obviously limit the content of any staff development programme. Therefore, a set of course materials for each participant group was produced to support learning and to offer further individual development. A comprehensive resource section was included to allow colleagues to easily access the relevant topic from the wealth of information already available on dyslexia.

Staff development activities within the University included a prescribed format for the participants' evaluation of training sessions. However, it was considered necessary to devise a further method for gathering feedback from participants on the programme to ensure thorough and relevant evaluation.

THE PRACTICE

An analysis of data provided via individual interviews and focus groups with students with dyslexia was conducted and relevant issues identified and themed.

Broadly, these areas included:

- Marking of work/assessment;
- Disclosure of dyslexia;

- Confidentiality;
- Provision of handouts in lectures;
- Self-esteem;
- Anxieties about assessment methods; and
- Negative views of dyslexia.

An analysis of external sources of information clarified the main issues to be covered within the staff development project. These included the following:

- SENDA legislation and its relevance to students with dyslexia in Higher Education;
- Utilising the assessment policy in relation to students with dyslexia;
- Data Protection Act regarding disclosure and confidentiality; and
- Best practice in both teaching and non-academic situations.

The structure and content of the staff development sessions were identified and a decision was made to offer targeted sessions for:

- Academic colleagues;
- Non-academic colleagues; and
- Collaborative partners.

The project team noted concerns over how best to communicate information about dyslexia to staff whilst ensuring ideas would be well-received. Experience suggested the possibility of diverse viewpoints particularly with regard to staff in academic roles, such as concerns over the maintenance of appropriate academic standards and an increased workload. It was recognised as important that colleagues felt their experience was valued and respected whilst also encouraging them to consider modifying their understanding and practice in relation to students with dyslexia where this was indicated by current legislation and best practice guidelines. It was felt that skilful communication would be needed to foster a collaborative atmosphere during the programme, allowing all participants to benefit from each other's experience and expertise.

An outline for the content of each training session was identified. The project team decided to focus on effectiveness and quality for the delivery and therefore the length of programme reflected the information that needed to be conveyed:

- Academic colleagues – two day programme;
- Non-academic colleagues – one day programme; and
- Collaborative partners – one day programme.

The layout of the training room was discussed and it was agreed that participants should be seated in groups of four per table to facilitate group work activities.

Academic Staff

Drawing upon their own experience and reports from students, the project team identified that academic staff ranged from those with limited understanding of dyslexia to those with considerable knowledge. However, it was considered unnecessary to offer an awareness course at a basic level for this target group, as academics are adept at understanding and evaluating theoretical concepts. It was decided, therefore, to include theories of dyslexia and present an overview of the disparate approaches and inherent contradictions within the field, rather than to over-simplify dyslexia and present it as a unified concept amongst researchers.

As well as providing a theoretical basis, it was considered equally important to ensure that the practical aspects of supporting students with dyslexia were covered as these directly impact on students' learning experience and also meet the requirements of current disability legislation. By integrating practical support aspects and theoretical concepts, the aim was to demonstrate the basis for modifying teaching and learning practice.

The topic areas to be covered were identified as follows:

- Theories focusing on abilities of students with dyslexia: left/right hemispheric function and the difference model;
- The wide range of difficulties experienced by students with dyslexia: the automaticity theory;
- Visual perceptual problems sometimes known as scotopic sensitivity syndrome or Mers-Irlen syndrome; and
- The working memory hypothesis to illustrate a range of study problems experienced by students with dyslexia.

Within this framework, the practical aspects of providing support were identified as:

- Implementation of a dyslexia assessment policy;
- How to deal with disclosure of dyslexia and confidentiality;

- The procedures for dealing with special examination arrangements;
- The implications and responsibilities raised by legislation;
- The provision of dyslexia screening and diagnostic assessments;
- The process of obtaining funding to support students with dyslexia; and
- The division of responsibilities between the Dyslexia Unit, academic tutors, special needs tutors and individual students.

The range of delivery methods included:

- PowerPoint presentations;
- Simulations of dyslexic-type difficulties;
- Individual and group activities on implementation of support; and
- Case studies involving students with dyslexia.

Academic colleagues are familiar with challenging theories and research findings, therefore debate and discussion amongst this target group was anticipated and was be encouraged. It must also be recognised, however, that if participants are allowed unstructured debate, then the content and structure of the programme could be compromised by time constraints. A solution that was identified was to actively encourage challenges and questions amongst participants but for these to be noted in writing (through the provision of index cards on each table) and dealt with during a ‘question clinic’ at prescribed times during the programme. With the emphasis on collaborative learning, each table of participants could also receive questions from another group and devise answers to share with the whole group during a feedback session. This also allows controversial views to be shared in a context that provides an opportunity for constructive discussion.

Non-academic Staff

Non-academic colleagues also have a responsibility towards students with dyslexia through the provision of a range of student services. The aim of the programme for this target audience was to enable colleagues to reflect on how dyslexia may impact upon students who approach them in the context of their role and how they can make reasonable adjustments to support these students. Non-academic staff work in disparate roles, therefore the staff development programme provides opportunities for participants to personalise and extract the relevance of the information covered. The project team decided that a one-day programme was sufficient for these staff and that the session would provide an overview of dyslexia rather than examining disparate theories.

The areas covered included:

- An overview of the neurological basis for dyslexia;
- Strengths and difficulties commonly associated with dyslexia;
- How to deal with disclosure of dyslexia and confidentiality;
- The implications and responsibilities raised by legislation; and
- Supporting the student with dyslexia within a specific workplace setting.

The methods of delivery included:

- PowerPoint presentations;
- Simulations of dyslexic-type difficulties;
- Individual and group activities to define the implementation of support; and
- Case studies involving students with dyslexia.

Collaborative Partners

In common with many other universities, courses are also offered to students on a franchise basis in local colleges. Colleagues in partnership colleges should benefit from access to staff development on dyslexia in Higher Education in two main ways. Firstly, it should enable these staff to advise students who are applying to study at a university on relevant issues relating to their progression into Higher Education. Secondly, where university courses are offered as a franchise arrangement with a local institution, it should allow staff to learn the procedures and processes that should be applied to students undertaking that course. There are considerable differences in many aspects of support provision between Higher Education and Further Education and it is useful for Further Education staff to have an understanding of these so that accurate advice can be offered to students. Since the programme is aimed specifically at staff in support services, a prior understanding of dyslexia can be expected and theories are not included in the teaching content. This one-day course deals with relevant practical concerns so that those attending can disseminate relevant information to colleagues in their own institution.

The following areas are covered in this course:

- How to deal with disclosure of dyslexia and confidentiality;
- The implications and responsibilities raised by legislation;
- The process of applying for and obtaining funding for support in Higher Education; the Disabled Students' Allowances;
- The criteria for acceptance of diagnostic assessment reports as evidence of dyslexia: areas that should be covered in a report for it to be valid in Higher Education;
- The implementation of a dyslexia assessment policy;
- How students can obtain screening and assessment for dyslexia; and
- For students studying a university course at a partnership college, the division of duties and responsibilities between each institution.

The range of methods of delivery included:

- Pre-training questionnaire to identify areas to be covered;
- PowerPoint presentations;
- Individual and group activities to define the implementation of support; and
- Case studies involving students with dyslexia.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the staff development programme is to provide colleagues with sufficient information to support students with dyslexia in appropriate ways. The emphasis is on quality of information and, therefore, the session for academic staff lasts for two days and for non-academics and staff in partner colleges, the sessions last for one day. However, the project team have some concerns about whether staff would be able to devote this amount of time to attending such programmes. The intention is to present the courses for the first time during the academic year 2006-07. All resources are in place to enable the courses to go ahead.

Initially there will only be 16 places available on each course to allow for quality of delivery and to facilitate group discussions. This does mean, however, that only a limited number of staff will be able to access the programme. To counteract this problem, each programme will be offered several times during a year depending upon demand. However, there will still be a need for wider dissemination of information regarding the support of students with dyslexia. Another potential problem identified by the project team was the possibility that the course would attract staff who already had an interest in supporting students with dyslexia, whereas those staff whose understanding was limited may be less likely to attend.

For this reason, following delivery and evaluation of the programme, the main points of importance will be identified and condensed into three-hour sessions. When devised, these shorter sessions will offer colleagues the chance to cover sufficient information to respond to the needs of students with dyslexia in a way commensurate with their role. It is also hoped that the three-hour sessions will provide an incentive for participants to enrol upon one of the longer training courses on offer to extend their understanding of dyslexia. Discussions will take place as to whether a three-hour training course in dyslexia should be mandatory for particular groups of staff.

The main points from the training materials will also be extracted and offered on the Dyslexia Unit website so that access to information is openly available to staff at all times.

RESOURCES

All the resources are now in place to deliver these three sessions to academic staff, non-academic staff and collaborative partners in the academic year 2006-07. The delivery will be through the staff in the Dyslexia Unit of the Student Enabling Centre. Although some of the materials are specific to the University of Wolverhampton (e.g. the specified Dyslexia Assessment Policy) the programmes have been generically constructed. Versions of these will be made available on the STAR website (www.ulster.ac.uk/star).

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