

Hitting the Ground Running: The Role of Induction in Preparing Students for University

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Abstract

Students enter University from a variety of backgrounds and undergo a process of transition into University life. A theoretical framework describing the integration of incoming students into the academic and social systems of the university during this transition is discussed. Practical problems faced by new students arise not only from academic and social issues but also from their background characteristics. Those strategies designed to deal sympathetically with new students in Australia and North America as well as in the UK are outlined. Finally the results of a survey of induction processes in the University of Ulster is presented as an exemplar of general practice in the UK and compared with aspects of induction (orientation) which have been shown to be effective elsewhere. It is concluded that policy is best directed at emphasising those general factors that are successful in encouraging students to stay rather than only attempting to solve the problems of individual students.

Introduction

Research into the experiences of new university students is confined mainly to the study of dropouts from courses in Higher Education. Such studies have been carried out largely in North America in institutions that have had much higher drop out rates than those commonly experienced in the UK. Whilst this remains the case in general terms, the trend towards widening participation in UK Higher Education has not only raised concerns that standards might fall but also that problems associated with attrition will become more evident in the UK. These problems may be manifest, not only in increased rates of attrition, but also in changes in student preparedness and attitudes resulting in disengagement from social and educational processes and academic under-performance.

In this paper we will discuss:

- conceptual frameworks within which preparation for University might be considered;
- the practices, mainly in the USA, which have proved effective in meeting the needs of students who might otherwise have dropped out; and
- the provision of induction processes in the University of Ulster as an exemplar of current practice in the UK.

Conceptual frameworks

Most students enter Higher Education along a predictable timeline, representing the various stages of transition. Many of their experiences and the circumstances in which they will find themselves are, therefore, predictable and, as a consequence, potentially manageable. Success for the first year student is more than merely gaining sufficient academic credit to progress to the next year of the course but also involves educational and personal development (Upcraft and Gardner, 1989).

Specifically, this includes developing academic and intellectual competence, establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships and career goals and developing a balanced lifestyle.

Many factors associated both with the student and with the institution influence the success with which individuals complete the transition to University life. Retention and student performance are enhanced if institutions create an environment which bridges the gap between secondary and tertiary educational experiences.

The University environment is vital in shaping the personal development of the student. A number of models designed to illuminate the process of transition have been developed. Each has its own individual strengths and weaknesses and all are predicated to some extent on the traditional student leaving school and entering University as a sub- adult.

Campus Ecology

A Campus Ecology Approach (Banning, 1989) focuses on the impact the University environment has on student development. This approach identified the benefits of change in promoting student development. There is however, a fine balance to be achieved. If the "sending environment" (traditionally school) is significantly different from the "receiving environment" (the University) the degree of stress will be higher and the likelihood of failure greater. If the receiving environment is nearly the same, on the other hand, there will be less transition required but also less potential for student growth and development. The degree of fit between the new students' aspirations and the experiences provided by the institution can affect student satisfaction, academic achievement and personal growth. The conditions that have the most positive influence on student success are high levels of interaction among students, strong staff-student contact, the availability of accommodation in halls of residence and extensive extra-curricular activities (Banning, 1989).

Theory of Student Integration

Tinto's (1987) Theory of Student Integration is the most widely accepted and used model of student transition.

Tinto explains a decision to withdraw or persist as the culmination of a longitudinal process that determines the ability of the student to integrate into academic and social aspects of university life. He underpins his theoretical model by likening entry into University to a traditional "Rite of Passage" with its phases of separation, transition and incorporation. In order to be successful at university a student must first separate from his/her former environment. The transition period is the time of adjustment into the new environment and is a time of risk, anxiety and new experiences. Stress and a sense of loss and bewilderment can result in withdrawal from University early in the year. The final stage of incorporation marks the time of full integration and acceptance of and by the new environment.

Key factors in Tinto's model concern the attitude of the students before entry, viz., their intentions (career and other personal goals) and level of commitment (how well motivated they are towards the course and/ or institution). These factors interact with a student's early experience at the institution to determine that student's persistence. The factors that influence this persistence after entry include flexibility (how adaptable a student proves to be), incongruence (whether the institution provides an acceptable match to the student's prior academic and /or social expectations), difficulty (whether the student attains appropriate academic standards), and isolation, (the extent to which the student is excluded from social activities and integrates through friendships and relationships with staff and peers).

Student / Institution negotiation model

Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) developed a model of non-completion from qualitative data derived from studies of UK institutions. They criticised many previous attempts at explanatory models as being too focussed on the student; i.e. seeking faults in students and their behaviour to explain their non-completion. They reasoned that the cause of non-completion was shared equally between the student (who did not fit academically and/or socially) and the institution that was not suitable for that student (either academically or socially). The main elements influencing decisions to leave are clustered under the headings, "student preparedness" and "compatibility of choice" both of which involve elements of student and institutional characteristics.

Clearly, this model has much in common with the Campus Ecology Approach (Banning, 1989) but is also compatible with Tinto's student integration model. Poor student preparedness is concerned with inaccurate perceptions of what life at University will be like. This is associated with indirect and out of date sources of information such as teachers, friends etc, and promotional literature produced by Universities for the purposes of marketing courses. A poor choice has its effects throughout a student's University career and derives from unfulfilled or incompatible student expectations of the institution and the disappointment of staff in the students they have admitted.

Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) identify different factors involved in the failure of mature and traditional students to complete their studies. While mature students have normally entered University with a better appreciation of the academic and social demands that their studies will place upon them, they are more prone to sudden, post entry, changes in their personal circumstances.

Practical problems faced by new University students

All the conceptual frameworks described above view transition as a process with interactions between students and between staff and students at their core. Many of the problems of transition are associated with the stresses arising from adjustment from a teacher dependent, supportive secondary school environment to a more independent approach to life and to learning. They will affect all students to a greater or lesser extent and will have their greatest effects in the months after entering university when students are making early adjustments (Maxwell, 1996). Those most seriously affected are unable to engage with their new environment and lack confidence in their ability to cope with the new personal and academic demands imposed upon them (Rickinson and Rutherford, 1995).

Academic and social integration

For a transition into university to be made smoothly, students need to integrate socially and academically. If these are not achieved initially they can have effects penetrating far into the undergraduate life of the individual. Academic integration is dominated by the student's academic performance and the quality of formal and informal interactions with academic staff.

Social integration, on the other hand, refers to the ease of making friends on campus, and the presence of sizeable numbers of students with similar lifestyles and values (Grosset, 1991). If the quality of either form of integration is low, the commitment made by the individual to the institution will also be low. In turn, this will result in academic underperformance or failure, dropping out, or simply a much-diminished quality of undergraduate life. The consequences of a lack of academic integration include a dislike of the course of study, dissatisfaction with university staff and quality of teaching and difficulty with the academic level and workload of programmes of study. Farr (1994) found that course-related variables such as levels of interest, satisfaction with course content, the standard of teaching and the extent to which the course met expectations were significantly related to non-completion. It is clear that university staff have some control over the conditions for academic integration and the ability of the student to make a commitment to the institution (Grosset, 1991; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980).

Students who are not socially integrated may experience emotional problems in not being able to adapt to the emotional task of leaving home and attaching themselves to a new life at university. They find themselves having difficulty making friends; they experience homesickness, disorientation, isolation and feelings of being lost (Rickinson and Rutherford, 1995).

Lack of preparation

Students who lack the appropriate preparation for life as a university student will find it more difficult to make the necessary personal and academic adjustments. Such a lack of preparation is evidenced by the persistence of study and learning methods associated with secondary education (Cook and Leckey, 1999). Students who have not developed independent study habits in their first year will experience difficulties in subsequent years when they will still be affected by a lack of ability to carry out intellectual tasks such as analysis and critical evaluation (Harris and Palmer, 1995). Associated with this is the concern that 'A'-levels are too narrow a preparation for the demands of Higher Education with little or no emphasis on teamwork or independence of approach (Roberts and Higgins, 1992).

Lack of realistic prior perceptions of Higher Education

Perceptions of Higher Education tend to revolve around stereotypical assumptions such as moderate academic demands and an exciting social life (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998). Indeed, many students still measure their first year success in meeting their expectations for a rich social life. The most rewarding experiences appear to be meeting new people, making new friends and getting away from home. Other inaccurate prior perceptions relate to the amount of time spent in lectures and study and the belief that the nature of learning would not differ too much from that experienced in secondary school (Cook and Leckey, 1999). Many prefer a teaching style that promotes surface learning only, involving accepting and recording specific information.

Personal characteristics

Of value to those planning induction programmes will be information concerning the groups of students prone to particular types of problems. Academic ability is the most important determinant of success, but other factors such as age and gender also make significant contributions. Yorke (1997) for instance, has shown that males are more likely than females to report having difficulty with aspects of studying. Such difficulties concern a lack of study skills, a low commitment to study, difficulty with the programme of study and a lack of academic progress. Furthermore, age has also been shown to influence the problems experienced (Johnson, 1994; Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998; Power et al, 1987; Yorke, 1997). In general, older students tend to make better choices of course and tend to be more focussed than students of school leaving age. On the other hand, they are more likely to be adversely affected by sudden changes in their domestic circumstances (Farr, 1994; Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998). Younger students tend to be more dissatisfied with the quality of teaching and with aspects of the environment in which they study (Yorke, 1997). School leavers have been found to be less diligent in their study habits and less academically orientated than older students (Power et al, 1987). Youth and inexperience characterise those students who leave through academic failure (Johnston, 1994).

A further influence on the level of commitment felt by an individual to the institution is the initial preference expressed in applying through the University and College Admission System (UCAS). Johnes (1990) found a negative relationship between dropout and ranking the university first in applying through UCAS. Yorke (1997) has clarified this relationship since he found that those who obtained a place through 'clearing' were less likely to have their expectations met concerning institutional facilities and thus had less institutional commitment. Students who live at home also find it more difficult to integrate into campus life (Woodward and Bradshaw, 1989).

Experiences elsewhere

Provisions for students entering Universities are generally known as induction in the UK but as orientation in Australia and North America. In the U.S.A., orientation frequently includes credit bearing academic skills development programmes known as the First Year Seminar or University 101. These modules take the form of a tutorial spanning the first semester or the entire first year. Typical skill areas addressed include writing and communication skills, library skills, critical reasoning, problem solving and how to think and learn. Orientation courses evolved out of the need to help new students adjust to the college environment, whereas seminar courses emphasise academic topics. These courses therefore, encourage students to grow academically; vocationally (career planning); socially (mixing with others and contributing to the welfare of the community); physically (an appreciation of the value of fitness and nutrition) and emotionally (coping with stress and anxiety). These programmes have been demonstrated to enhance student success across a range of outcome measures including retention, academic performance, student satisfaction, and knowledge and utilisation of student support services. Furthermore, they have dramatic beneficial effects on students who are thought to be at risk of academic failure (Pérez, 1998). Power et al (1987) have identified some ways in which academic and social integration can be heightened by related processes. In particular, tutorials are recommended emphasising skills such as expressing complex arguments, using the library, analysing subjects, learning the process of essay-writing and integrating knowledge with skills, all of which are best learned in small group situations.

Orientation programmes vary in their scope, but most Universities provide students with information about facilities, services and the courses on which they are enrolled. Further, most facilitate opportunities for new students to meet staff and other students. These orientation programmes are widely acknowledged for their contribution to student success and retention in the US Higher Education system. Perigo and Upcraft (1989) have identified three main functions of orientation programmes. Firstly, incoming students should be made familiar with the academic demands that will be made of them and of the available support services. Secondly, students should be helped to make a personal adjustment to University life resulting in the maximum personal development. In particular they should be encouraged to participate actively in the academic and social life of the University. Thirdly, they suggest that orientation programmes should involve the families of new students so that they are fully aware of the changes that the student will be expected to undergo. This is so that the personal and emotional support made available to the student over the critical transition period can be maximised.

Properly conceived then, induction and related processes assist students and their families to adapt to their new circumstances. Indeed, participation in induction (or orientation) programmes has been shown to be critical to students' success and to their sense of connection with the institution (Pérez, 1998). The importance of the timing of these programmes cannot be underestimated since most withdrawing students do so in the first year of their courses with the distribution skewed strongly to the first semester.

Provision at the University of Ulster

The University of Ulster has about 12,000 full time and 4,000 part time undergraduate students enrolled on a wide variety of courses, many of them vocational in nature. It is currently in the middle third of most UK University league tables including 'A' level scores on intake, student: staff ratio, and teaching and research assessment scores. It has a good record in widening participation and in the percentage of students receiving upper seconds and first class degrees but is in the bottom third for the amount spent per student on student facilities and for graduate employment. (THES, 2001). No one institution could be taken as typical of all universities.

Nevertheless information is offered here concerning the University of Ulster as an exemplar of a large, diverse, multi-campus organisation which is near the middle of the range of most measures of University performance in the UK.

During June 2000, we sent a questionnaire to all course directors. Although there were 362 named courses at the University at this time, some course directors were responsible for more than one course. 139 questionnaires were eventually returned out of a possible 300. 82 related to undergraduate courses. The data presented in this paper refers to these undergraduate courses only. It should be noted that this survey will report a quantified account of practice and thus necessarily conceal much excellent practice in this area.

Induction programmes

The questionnaire distinguished between induction programmes designed to orient new entrants to the University and study skill programmes. 89% of respondents stated that an induction programme was offered to new students. Programmes offered on a full-time basis are more likely to offer induction than part time courses. Around half (51%) of undergraduate courses had study skills programmes, either integrated into subject material or as independent entities.

We asked Course Directors to specify their most important reason for induction. The question was open-ended and thus the variety of responses was re-classified into the discrete categories in Table I. It is clear that induction is regarded as an information-giving event rather than a process of academic and social integration for the student.

Table I

Most induction programmes (52%) lasted for one day or less. 67 % of programmes were located in the first week of the semester and the remaining third ran induction through the first semester. The limited duration of the induction programme limits what can be incorporated. The most widely practised activities are associated with the course, talks from the library and computing services and meetings with the advisor of studies. There appears little apparent opportunity for student interaction during the activities organised.

Relatively few induction programmes have informal social gatherings between staff and students (28%).

Course Directors were asked to rate the importance of specified induction related activities on a Likert Scale. Unsurprisingly the ranking reflects the frequency with which activities are conducted (Table II).

Table II

These data conceal a substantial number of course directors who rated some aspects highly (especially an input from the counselling service) while not offering it in their own induction programmes either through lack of time or resources.

Course Directors were asked whether they would make any changes to their induction programme if there were no resource implications. Over half (53%) responded that they would make no changes at all or did not respond. The most popular changes were expanding the study skill provision (18%) and extending the process through the whole of semester 1 (10%).

Study skills programmes

Dedicated study skills programmes in the University are not widespread, although some courses may achieve the same outcomes without recognising the provision as a study skills programme. Of the Course Directors responding, 49% stated that there was no provision for the development of study skills within their course. Where such programmes did exist, most (44%) were integrated into the general subject based teaching and a further 20% dealt with study skills as a component of the induction programme. 12% of those providing study skills development did so through a dedicated module. The skills developed in undergraduate courses and the frequency with which components of assessment are dedicated to these specific skills are given in Table III.

Table III

Some skills such as examination preparation and note taking are not easy to assess.

Nevertheless, it is clear that even where a skill is relatively easy to assess through performance (i.e. verbal presentation skills and IT skills) these are relatively rarely subject to direct assessment. Presumably, they are subject to indirect assessment during the course of the preparation of assignments directed at other learning outcomes. We can conclude from this data that the systematic assessment of students in study skill areas is relatively uncommon.

We asked Course Directors who had study skills provision in their courses what changes they would make in study skills programmes if resources were not a limiting factor. Over half would make no changes (54%) and around 17% suggested that they would like to adopt a more formal structured approach or expand the range of study skills developed. Relatively few (5%) suggested that they would bring in an expert to facilitate a study skills programme.

Discussion

Theoretical models of the transition between the secondary and the tertiary phase of education help us to formulate policies and practices which can facilitate that transition. UK policy is moving Universities towards a tertiary education system in which participation rates are high, in which many students will be the first of their family to attend University, in which Higher Education will be a significant financial burden and in which Higher Education Institutions will be competing to recruit relatively scarce, well qualified students. It is thus clear that tertiary institutions in the UK will have to pay greater attention to assisting students manage this transition if high attrition rates and under-performance are to be avoided.

The theoretical perspectives described in the early part of this paper indicate a variety of reasons for students leaving or under-performing, which in turn suggest a basis for institutional action to reduce attrition. The process of transition into university involves some stress and personal upheaval, but most students will possess the personal resources to overcome the challenge. For others, the long-term desire to succeed (especially in some high-demand courses) will be sufficient to offset the stresses involved in transition.

There will however, be a proportion of students for whom the stress of transition will be more than they are equipped to deal with unaided and will result in isolation and personal trauma. The experience of the first semester is critical to the success of these students. This is true not only concerning decisions about staying but also in determining their level of performance, personal development, confidence and motivation.

Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) have suggested that appropriate institutional responses to the threat of greater attrition should include more responsible marketing strategies and better support for mature students coupled with more refined processes for identifying students at risk, the early promotion of active learning and early formative assessments. This however, neglects the social integration of students into the institution which has been identified as a key factor by Tinto (1987) and the development of peer support which supersedes the staff support with which students will be familiar at school (Cook and Leckey, 1999)

It is difficult to be prescriptive concerning the ways in which an institution should deal with individual students. It is clear, however, that there are general elements of good practice which will promote student well being, increase the likelihood of their staying to complete their course and maximise their personal development. A comparison between this good practice and the predominant practice in the University of Ulster is given in Table IV.

Table IV

Attrition and the processes that underlie it apply to all students in all courses. There is much excellent practice as far as induction and study skills development is concerned in the University of Ulster. It is however, not widespread and the majority of incoming students do not experience it. Thus although induction is practised by most courses in the University it is seen largely as a process of information giving rather than as a method of promoting academic and social integration into the new University environment. The emphasis for most induction programmes is firmly on the course rather than the needs and concerns of the student. The evidence from our survey would suggest that academic staff do not attach a high priority to the development of study skills.

Although the contextualisation of these skills through embedding them into subject specific modules would seem to be good practice, the rarity with which these skills are assessed would suggest that the process remains undervalued.

Conclusion

New students come from a variety of backgrounds and may come to University with uninformed or unrealistic expectations (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998; Cook and Leckey, 1999). To experience early success, new students must learn to understand and meet the expectations of their new environment, particularly concerning study skills, independent living and time management. Intrusive, proactive strategies must be used to reach new students before they have had an opportunity to experience feelings of failure, disappointment and confusion (Upcraft and Gardner, 1989). During the first year, an institution is presented with a window of opportunity for establishing a firm and positive relationship with its students, but that window is relatively narrow. It is the group of students at the highest risk of dropout that are least well served by an initiation into university life that stresses only information-giving, and that is of insufficient duration for students to establish the relationships and attachments that form the basis of a smooth transition and success at university.

Finally, each student drops out for his or her own individual reason. Attempts to solve problems of student attrition by addressing these individual reasons are probably doomed to failure. Rather, the problems of attrition should be viewed as the factors encouraging students to leave outweighing the factors encouraging them to stay. Institutions might be better served by identifying those factors associated with staying and promoting them to the whole student body rather than concentrating on the identification of the problems of individuals and applying solutions, after the event, to the few.

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Tables

Table I.

The most important purposes of induction in the view of Course Directors.

Category	Most important feature (% of course directors)
An information giving exercise on courses and services	43
Academic preparation for the course ahead	18
Providing a welcoming environment	12
Acclimatisation to the University environment	10
Facilitate interaction among students	7
Developing staff/student relationships.	4

Table II.

The importance and frequency of activities during induction ranked by their importance as perceived by Course Directors. The frequency of occurrence refers to the percentage of Course Directors responding who stated that the activity was a component of their induction activity. The average score is an indication of the importance placed on each activity by course directors derived from averaging the responses on the Likert scale.

(1- Very important; 2- Important; 3- Undecided; 4- Not very important; 5- Not important at all.)

Activities ranked by perceived importance	Frequency of occurrence (%)	Average score (importance)
Introductory talk to the course	97	1.2
Library tour	89	1.3
Meeting with studies advisers	83	1.3
Talk from library service	81	1.5
Study Skills sessions	61	1.6
Computer Services Talk	62	1.7
Talk from counselling service	42	2.0
Introductory talk to the school	58	2.2
Campus tour	32	2.6
Social gathering with staff	28	3.1

Table III

Skill areas developed by study skills programmes.

	Frequency (% of all courses)	% of courses specifically assessing the skill
Essay writing	48	28
Planning study time	42	1
Note taking and reading	40	2
Exam preparation	40	4
IT Skills	39	27
Group Work	35	21
Report writing	34	21
Verbal presentation skills	34	22
Problem solving	34	17

Table IV

A comparison between good practice and the common practice at the University of Ulster

	Good practice	Normal practice at the University of Ulster
Sensitive period	2-6 weeks into semester 1	1st week of the semester or during registration.
Duration	Through the first semester	One day or less
Academic orientation	Information concerning structure of course, teaching, and learning methods and means of assessment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Course based talks common. •Information in course handbooks.
Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Library orientation •Computing orientation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Library Tours common •Library Tours common •Computing uncommon
Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Involvement of Counselling service and Careers Service •Information for the disabled 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Involvement of student services uncommon. •Disability awareness involved early in student career.
Social integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Informal meetings with staff •Opportunities to meet peers in informal surroundings facilitated. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Formal meeting with advisor common. •Informal staff-student meetings uncommon.
Extramural activities	Wide range of clubs and societies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Relatively few non-sporting societies. •Little campus based social activity
Status	Compulsory or so attractive that few students miss it.	Voluntary with a high percentage of non-attendance