



*Guidelines for the Management  
of  
Student Transition*

*The STAR Project*

*(Student Transition And Retention)*

*Guidelines for the Management of Student Transition*

**The STAR (Student Transition and Retention) Project**  
**[www.ulster.ac.uk/star](http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star)**

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# **The STAR Project**

## **Student Transition and Retention**

### ***Guidelines for the Management of Student Transition***

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## **Summary of the Guidelines**

### **Section 1 – Prior to Entry**

- 1.1 Information about campuses and courses should be accurate and lead to realistic student expectations.
- 1.2 Teachers, careers advisors, family members and other educational institutions are important clients of the institution and should receive up-to-date, accurate and relevant information. Two-way communication should be promoted.
- 1.3 Support should be available prior to study particularly where problems of transition may be predictable.

### **Section 2 – Induction and Beyond**

- 2.1 Induction activities should familiarise students with the local area, the campus and its support services.
- 2.2 Induction activities should highlight students' academic obligations and the obligations of the staff to the students.
- 2.3 Induction activities should support the development of those independent study habits suitable for higher education.
- 2.4 Induction events should provide the foundations for social interactions between students and the development of communities of practice.
- 2.5 Induction activities should promote the development of good communication between staff and students.
- 2.6 Induction is required to manage transitions between elements of courses.

### **Section 3 – Curriculum Development**

- 3.1 The curriculum should be relevant to and inform students' vocational aspirations early on in the course.
- 3.2 The course and its delivery should assist students' transition from their previous educational experience to studying at tertiary level as well as addressing the different needs arising from the subject backgrounds of the student cohort.
- 3.3 Students should receive regular, formative evaluations of their work early in their course or course component.
- 3.4 Attendance at all teaching sessions is a key requirement for success.

### **Section 4 – Staff Development**

- 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 focussed investigation, personal reflection and development and seek to communicate the outcomes to others.

## **Introduction**

These guidelines have been produced to help the identification of good practice to aid student transition. They have been developed from experience of a variety of institutions and literature and are designed as a checklist of those activities that may have an impact on the proper management of student transitions. They indicate a set of outcomes that will contribute to the smooth integration of students into courses and into new aspects of their learning experience. The emphasis is on what should be achieved and although some suggestions are made concerning activities that might be employed these are only used to clarify principles. Other publications from the STAR project emphasise activities that serve to address the guidelines detailed in this document. These will be available in hard copy and on the internet at <http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star>.

## **What is Induction?**

Many of the suggestions in these guidelines relate to induction as a process. Our initial review of practice in the higher education sector revealed that there was no shared understanding of what induction might be. For the purposes of this document therefore, induction is taken as a set of processes that introduces students to:

- A higher education institution as an academic community;
- Their campus as a distinctive social organisation and the providers of central support such as counselling and careers guidance;
- Their faculty, school or department as an organisational unit;
- Their course of study as the academic framework in which they will learn;
- The academic staff who will deliver the course and assess their performance;
- An individual member of staff whose responsibility it is to advise them on both academic and pastoral matters; and
- Their peer group.

In addition, induction processes should be designed as a bridge between the educational practices and lifestyles formerly experienced and those considered as desirable in the context of higher education.

## **Assumptions made within the Guidelines**

These guidelines are based on a series of assumptions concerning the general nature of the intake of students into higher education institutions, the nature of the courses they offer and appropriate outcomes of a process of transition.

Our assumptions are:

- That every student admitted or permitted to progress to the next phase of education is academically capable of completing that phase;
- That induction potentially encompasses all interactions with students during those times at which they move from one phase of their education to another (on entry,

on returning from a period of work-based learning, on joining a new module, on direct entry to an advanced level, etc.);

- Induction processes will make explicit links between students' prior experiences and their expectations of the institution/ faculty/course/module; and
- That the institution is more than a provider of learning opportunities but is a social and academic community of which each student is a member.

Although the guidelines that follow are based on the best available evidence, many of the factors that lead to student insecurity, problems of retention and underperformance will be course or campus specific and generalisations cannot be made. It is, therefore, of critical importance that higher education institutions monitor the opinions of their students, and the rates and causes of attrition. This can be completed most valuably at the level of the course.

## **The Guidelines**

The management of periods of transition are considered in four sections: events prior to entry; additional activities which are provided to support students in transition (commonly called induction); adaptations of the curriculum to better meet the needs of diverse student groups; and the development of staff expertise and awareness.

### **Section 1 – Prior to Entry**

Student retention is promoted by ensuring compatibility between students' expectation of the course and institution and their actual experience. It is important, therefore, that contact with students prior to entry either to a course or to a component of a course conveys a realistic view of the student experience. This is particularly significant where the needs of the student are different from the main cohort, for example where the student has a disability or a specific learning difficulty.

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

##### Guidance

*Individual institutions do not have total control over all information a student uses to form their expectations of higher education. Nevertheless, all have obligations to ensure that the information that is supplied to prospective students is accurate at the time of publication, balanced and accessible. Course teams will want to consider the following:*

- Is the information presented in published form (e.g. prospectus, web-site) a truthful and accurate presentation of the institution and its programmes of study?
- Does the information provide an accurate portrayal of student support services and their capacities to assist students?
- Is there consistency between information supplied centrally and that from the faculty or school? Is the information reasonably complete?

- Does the information supplied during the application and admission procedures accurately reflect the content of the course and the staff with whom new students will interact? Does the information communicate realistic career goals? Does the information raise unrealistic expectations of those students with disabilities or specific learning difficulties? For such students, have detailed discussions taken place in order to fully assess their needs?
- Will students understand the nature and quantity of work expected of them during the course from the information supplied?
- Does the course literature provide enough information for potential applicants to confirm their suitability for the content and level of the course?
- Does the information contain warnings of likely course changes or changes in the availability of optional elements of courses? For example, the information given to students prior to entry typically relates to the present course, so options or combinations they think will be available to them in later years may not be on offer when they reach that stage.

**1.2 Teachers, careers advisors, family members and other educational institutions are important clients of the institution and should receive up-to-date, accurate and relevant information. Two-way communication should be promoted.**

Guidance

*Schools, families and peers influence the choices of prospective students and also support them while they complete their courses. If they have accurate perceptions of the institution and its courses then the likelihood of prospective students making inappropriate choices will be decreased. This is particularly relevant for 'first generation' students. Where events are organised at which families may be present (e.g. advice days and registration week), the opportunity should be taken to explain to family members the challenges and benefits of being a student and how best the student may be supported. The engagement of both students and their immediate family in the life of the institution increases commitment and thereby has the potential to increase retention. This is especially important when the prospective student has a disability or a specific learning difficulty. In addition, institutions should establish relationships with educational organisations from which students are recruited. Solid relationships are built on mutual respect and two-way communications. The following should be considered:*

- The needs of family members at open and advice days and during the registration period;
- The needs of career advisors and teachers for accurate information; and
- Arrangements to gather and to respond to the opinions of key stakeholders.

**1.3 Support should be available prior to study particularly where problems of transition may be predictable.**

Guidance

*Groups of students with common backgrounds such as international students, students returning from a period of study abroad or from a period of work-based learning,*

*students with disabilities or specific learning difficulties, etc. will benefit from events put in place prior to the formal commencement of study. These may serve to reinforce commitment, to add a social dimension to study and promote early identification and solution of potential problems in a more relaxed environment than is common in the early weeks of the semester. The following should be considered:*

- Bridging courses that permit particular groups of students to gain experiences to match those of the remainder of their colleagues;
- Early enrolment that permits an extended period of adjustment in a new locality and socialisation with a new group of colleagues;
- Summer schools that address particular aspects of students' backgrounds which may require support; and
- Where a student has a disability or a specific learning difficulty early contact between the student, central services and academic staff is essential to ensure that the early experiences of the student are positive. Institutions should be committed to provide a suitable learning environment for all students. In the case of students with disabilities or specific learning difficulties this might include consideration of:
  - Early consultation with course tutors so that appropriate preparations can be made;
  - Adaptations to lecture or laboratory space;
  - The adjustment of teaching styles to promote inclusion, e.g. talking only while looking at the audience to facilitate lip-reading;
  - Provision of teaching aids in particular formats;
  - Adjustment of the timetable to allow time to travel between locations;
  - A network of trained support workers;
  - Production of 'tailored' information packs. (Students with different educational backgrounds would also benefit from this.); and
  - Advice on accessing local support systems outside of the university, e.g. specialist National Health Service support units. This is particularly important for students with mental health difficulties.

## **Section 2 – Induction and Beyond**

We view induction as a sequence of managed outcomes that should occur throughout year 1 and beyond. Some of these will be achieved during events that are independent of the teaching system and others will be embedded in the curriculum. The achievement of the outcomes is the key issue, not when or where they are achieved or who facilitates them.

### **2.1 Induction activities should familiarise students with the local area, the campus and its support services.**

#### Guidance

*Students often arrive at an unfamiliar campus in an unfamiliar town without peer support. Simple guides indicating relevant key locations to meet immediate academic and domestic needs should be provided. Particular groups of students such as those*

*transferring from other tertiary institutions may require special attention. Further support may be needed to provide:*

- Additional guidance and signage to direct students to resources they need for their particular course and social needs;
- Navigation exercises (e.g. treasure hunts) to familiarise students with their surroundings;
- Ready access to information relating to the accommodation office, health service, student counselling and guidance service, careers service, students' union, sports centres and studies advisors;
- Assistance for students living away from home. This particularly applies to foreign students but is also relevant, for example, to students from rural backgrounds coming to city centre institutions and vice versa;
- A general introduction to the way in which the institution is organised where this affects the student experience;
- Information about how students gain access to the institution's information services such as the library, resource centres and the computer network;
- Information to course tutors about new students joining existing cohorts; and
- Assistance for the particular needs of students with disabilities or specific learning difficulties. This should include encouraging such students to disclose a disability or a specific learning difficulty and the provision of support staff to follow through on such disclosures.

## **2.2 Induction activities should highlight students' academic obligations and the obligations of the staff to the students.**

### Guidance

*Much information may be contained in institution, course and/or module handbooks and web sites. Nevertheless, key elements will need to be highlighted for students and an early opportunity should be taken to ensure that students understand the contents of such materials. Students should be made aware of the need to attend teaching sessions and to submit assignments on time but staff should also be made aware of their obligations to support student learning. Consideration should be given to providing all such materials in a format accessible by students with disabilities or specific learning difficulties. Course teams should consider:*

- The content of student handbooks and web sites;
- Methods for ensuring that students understand the contents of handbooks and web sites;
- Whether students are adequately trained to access and navigate around electronic systems to acquire the information they may need;
- Whether staff understand the obligations placed on them by the contents of handbooks and web sites (e.g. the timing of assessments, assessment turn round times, the nature and purpose of feedback, studies advice, etc.);
- The provision of a pastoral support system for students and the means by which staff can facilitate students' access to student support services; and
- How personal development plans are introduced and supported.

### **2.3 Induction activities should support the development of those independent study habits suitable for higher education.**

#### Guidance

*Many new students need to be weaned from staff-dependent study skills that they may bring from their previous educational experiences (e.g. dependence on notes, treating information as fact rather than as evidence, surface learning). Peer support, information re-organisation and searching for evidence need to be promoted. Course teams should consider:*

- How students are initiated into ways of studying appropriate to higher education;
- How the expertise of library, resource centre, information technology user services and careers service staff can best be utilised to support the development of skills and attitudes to work;
- How and where reflective practice and self-evaluation are promoted; and
- How to make assessment methods accessible and transparent. The learning outcomes of individual modules and the course should be carefully scrutinised to ensure that they are achievable by students with a disability or a specific learning difficulty.

### **2.4 Induction events should provide the foundations for social interactions between students and the development of communities of practice.**

#### Guidance

*Being at a higher education institution is a social experience for students. Class coherence and peer support are important characteristics of those who are successful. Socially isolated students and those who feel that they do not belong are the most likely to leave. The early establishment of a peer support group (a community of practice) should be a priority for all students. Particular attention should be paid to students who are entering the institution for the first time in the second or later years of a course to join an existing cohort and to those with special needs. The following should be considered:*

- The use of ‘ice-breakers’ during induction events to promote student interaction;
- The use of formative group work early in the curriculum to encourage students to work together and develop appropriate inter-personal and professional skills;
- Varying the composition of groups to ensure that individuals have a broad experience of working in different social contexts;
- Establishing systems whereby senior students mentor new students;
- Staff support for subject-based student societies to encourage mixing of students and the promotion of student commitment to the course/subject; and
- Deliberately mixing transfer and international students with those already on the course.

## **2.5 Induction activities should promote the development of good communication between staff and students.**

### Guidance

*Good, friendly relationships with academic staff promote student commitment to the course and aid student retention. Students who feel that they are on the same team as the staff are more likely to achieve their potential than those who feel that they are on opposing sides. The monitoring of students' social and academic progress early in the course is a significant component of student care and contributes to the design of effective student support. Course teams should consider:*

- Means of meeting new students informally during the early stages of the course;
- Methods of promoting collaboration, such as small group tutorials, or collaborative project work;
- Variety in the opportunities to meet teaching staff to reduce dependency on a single point of contact; and
- Means of monitoring student development, the diagnosis of problems and the implementation of specific remedies.

## **2.6 Induction is required to manage transitions between elements of courses.**

### Guidance

*During work-based learning students will adopt behaviours necessary to the workplace but which are not necessarily supportive of academic study. They need to be prepared to adapt rapidly to academic study on their return. In addition, new teaching methods may be introduced during a course or between one course and another. It is essential that information gathered about a student with a disability or a specific learning difficulty should be forwarded, after full consultation with the student and with the student's consent, to work-based learning providers, to other course directors, etc. to ensure that a smooth transition for these students takes place. The following should be considered:*

- The preparation of students for learning away from the institution, e.g. work-based learning;
- The exploitation and sharing of the learning gained from periods away from the institution;
- Induction processes designed to support students experiencing new teaching and/or assessment methods for the first time, e.g. distance learning, group work, computer based assessment, etc.;
- The re-introduction of students to forms of academic study and assessment; and
- The role of returning work-based learning students to induct and mentor students who are about to embark on placements.

## Section 3 – Curriculum Development

Many students who leave early from a course indicate that the course was unsuitable or that they wish to join another course or institution. Although some students genuinely re-think their goals in the early weeks of studying at tertiary level, most of these early leavers are disappointed with the course and/or the institution.

### **3.1 The curriculum should be relevant to and inform students' vocational aspirations early on in the course.**

#### Guidance

*Students join courses or parts of courses for a variety of reasons. Early study should help confirm their choice of course or course component and provide an appreciation of professional opportunities afforded by the course. In particular, the following questions should be considered:*

- Does the curriculum build from students' previous experience and provide work that is relevant to the aspirations of the students it has attracted?
- Are there early and frequent opportunities to involve the careers service to support, enhance and promote careers education, information and guidance directly related to the course?
- Would formal and/or informal sessions with past graduates who are professionally employed within the subject area help to contextualise the curriculum? Additionally, it may be useful for the course team to compile a list of past students with disabilities or specific learning difficulties who have successfully completed the qualification and who may act as role models for current students.

### **3.2 The course and its delivery should assist students' transition from their previous educational experience to studying at tertiary level as well as addressing the different needs arising from the subject backgrounds of the student cohort.**

#### Guidance

*Students come to a course typically with a range and variety of intake qualifications. There should be a smooth transition from their previous experience to tertiary education or from one teaching method to another. The most effective support is given in the context of the curriculum and integrated into subject based teaching. The following should be considered:*

- A review of the changing pattern of student backgrounds, the content and standards of qualifications as well as the methods and contexts in which they are taught. Transitional curricula and assessment methods should be considered to support students in changing their study habits;
- How assistance in developing appropriate study skills can be integrated into the curriculum;
- The needs of students with poor experiences in supporting subjects, such as mathematics for engineers and chemistry for biologists;

- Provision for the development of communication skills. Students should be made aware of good practice in essay and report writing and should be given opportunities for developing oral presentation skills;
- Variation in the teaching methods employed in recognition of the different ways in which students learn. Prior to studying at tertiary level, students may have only experienced teaching methods applied to small groups (less than 20). In particular, where students with disabilities or specific learning difficulties are joining a course, attention should be paid to the different practices that they may have experienced prior to entry; and
- The assistance given to the development of practical/laboratory/workshop skills relevant to the course.

### **3.3 Students should receive regular, formative evaluations of their work early in their course or course component.**

#### Guidance

*The extensive and early use of formative assessment is a key component of rapid student adjustment. The expected standards of work are communicated to students through the publication of marking criteria and feedback on assignments. It follows that, if new students are to work at the required standard, they must know what constitutes that standard and how near they are to attaining it. The following should be considered:*

- The role of personal development planning in defining academic standards and stressing the relevance of feedback;
- The purposes of assessment and the feedback students receive on their work;
- The pattern and timing of assignments and likely feedback during the whole of the academic year;
- The obligation of staff to provide timely, meaningful and supportive feedback on students' work;
- The recognition of student diversity through the use of a range of assessment tools;
- Whether students understand the relevance of marking criteria; and
- Early recognition and referral to specialised staff of learning difficulties previously undiagnosed so that disabled students are not disadvantaged by delayed assessment of their needs.

### **3.4 Attendance at all teaching sessions is a key requirement for success.**

#### Guidance

*Attendance is crucial to achieving the learning outcomes of the course or components of it. Attendance and participation are demonstrations of commitment, a key indicator of retention. The following should be considered:*

- Efficient and meaningful 'academic alert' systems triggered by reduced attendance;
- Methods for diagnosing and addressing the underlying causes of non-attendance;

- Methods for ensuring that attendance at teaching sessions contribute significantly to student learning. Teaching sessions should be social, challenging and rewarding for staff and students alike; and
- Practical methods for monitoring attendance and its relation to performance.

## **Section 4 – Staff Development**

Academic staff are specialised in their subjects of study and increasingly have undertaken short periods of training in university teaching or academic practice. However, the areas of responsibility for academic staff are becoming more variable. Many staff need regular support to cope adequately with changing university infrastructures, the legal framework within which higher education now operates and the changing needs of students emanating from a rapidly changing secondary sector. Most institutions have staff development and/or educational development units that have accepted responsibility for identifying these needs and providing the support academic staff require. This section highlights where these needs might be focussed.

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

#### Guidance

*New students arrive every year but the staff complement remains relatively static. It follows that those responsible for course delivery will be required to update themselves on the potential attributes that new generations of students will bring with them. Staff and educational development units should consider:*

- Procedures for monitoring changes in teaching and assessment methods prior to entry and communicating these to relevant staff;
- Methods to encourage academic staff to audit how effective their current practice may be and to strive to adopt appropriate best practice in teaching and assessment methods; and
- Monitoring developments and changes in legislation in areas such as disability and equality so that timely staff development designed to update members of academic and support staff may be provided.

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

#### Guidance

*Teaching staff are usually the first point of contact for students needing support. Therefore, all teaching staff should be aware of university policies and procedures relating to this area. In particular this applies to the needs of foreign students, those seeking personal support and those with disabilities especially those that are (as yet) undeclared. Staff and educational development units should consider:*

- How best to disseminate information relating to procedures relating to disabilities and specific learning difficulties;

- How best to support staff to address issues of student support through their teaching and curriculum design;
- How best to develop staff awareness of the range of potential student problems (including financial, mental health, those relating to disability and academic) and appropriate referral procedures; and
- How best to raise staff awareness of the ways in which the institution meets the needs of students coming from abroad and from minority cultures.

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

Guidance

*Much expertise already lies with academic staff and this is often institution specific. What will work in one institution or department may not work elsewhere. It is thus important for good practice to be identified and shared. Experimental approaches to teaching are to be welcomed provided that they are monitored and evaluated and that the practice is appropriately modified in the light of experience. Departments might seek to promote good practice through:*

- Staff sharing experiences through teaching seminars;
- The adoption and evaluation of innovative practice;
- Regular monitoring of student performance and opinion as practice is developed;
- Regular internal publications such as occasional papers, teaching based newsletters or journals;
- Encouragement to publish evaluated practice in the educational literature; and
- Rewarding staff for initiatives in promoting smooth student transitions.

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## Further Information

The following publications and web sites may provide additional detail:

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<http://www.shef.ac.uk/disability/adtrain>, accessed 16-06-05.
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The STAR Project – promoting innovation in the management of the experiences of students in transition.

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