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Building the Environment: Academic Mentors and Enhanced Communication Supporting Transition and Building Belonging

Rationale for the case study

The transition of first year students to higher education, their induction and retention are now widely recognised as being fundamentally intertwined (Crosling et al, 2008; Thomas, 2012). Within this, the development of relationships and support between student-student and staff-student can significantly influence student futures in terms of remaining in and continuing their education. Indeed, a significant body of research now exists which argues that students are most likely to leave in the first year of entry (Yorke and Longden, 2007; Quinn et al 2005).

The School of the Built Environment, which traditionally and in-line with other similar Schools within the higher education sector in the UK, experienced significant levels of first year student attrition, in excess of 20%. This case study initially included three programmes which were linked in that they and, subsequently, their students shared a number of modules within their first year of study. This resulted in larger class sizes and a suspected dilution of student programme identity. The Built Environment Discipline Team's aim was to *improve* the first year student *experience* through building (early) *belonging*, supporting *transition* whilst improving retention. In doing so a School Retention and Success Plan was developed that included the introduction of: Academic Mentors; pre-induction contact; focused week 0 induction; transition modules; active attendance monitoring and the use of 'at risk' indicators. These interventions were developed taking congnisance of and applying the learning that was derived from the Stage 1 findings of the HEA What Works? Student retention and success project (2012).

The case study focuses upon the importance of early and on-going communication with students from pre-induction throughout their first year of study as a means of building student belonging and identity and, as a result, improving retention and success within the first year of study. The case study demonstrates a clear improvement across a number of indicators which were achieved though the extension of the project in two ways:

- the recognition that we needed to consider induction hand-in-hand with transition taking the broadest view in terms of building belonging and identity across first year and, indeed before, the year formally begins at the pre-induction stage; and
- the recognition that in order to ensure success delivering a consistent and sustained message to all students within the School was important therefore all thirteen Built Environment programmes defacto became part of the project.

In summary, the project has achieved significant improvements in retention across the School of the Built Environment bringing about increased student success including an increase in the number of students passing their modules at the first attempt. The project has also provided enhanced management data which has allowed us to understand the reasons why our students decide to withdraw from their studies.

Description/discussion of the intervention or change initiative and successful aspects

When the Built Environment Discipline Team began work we initially considered how we could improve induction as a medium to improve retention within three of our thirteen undergraduate programmes. However, our focus moved to: How can the School of the Built Environment improve the first year student *experience* through building (early) *belonging*, supporting *transition* and improving retention?

Why this change to a School wide emphasis and why the move beyond the traditional induction period? Essentially, the discipline team quickly realised that we needed a whole School approach because students across the School frequently:

- Shared accommodation;
- Shared transportation to/from campus;
- Shared learning, modules and team exercises/assessments; and
- Interacted on a social basis both on and off campus.

In brief, our students communicate across programmes both on a planned module and assessment basis and outside the classroom therefore if we were to be effective we needed to give a consistent message to all first year students and to consider the student experience throughout the first year including pre-entry and not solely the formal three day induction.

In response we developed a Built Environment First year Retention and Success Plan which had five elements. Central to this plan was the introduction of an Academic Mentoring system within the School.

School of the Built Environment:
First Year Retention and Student Success Plan
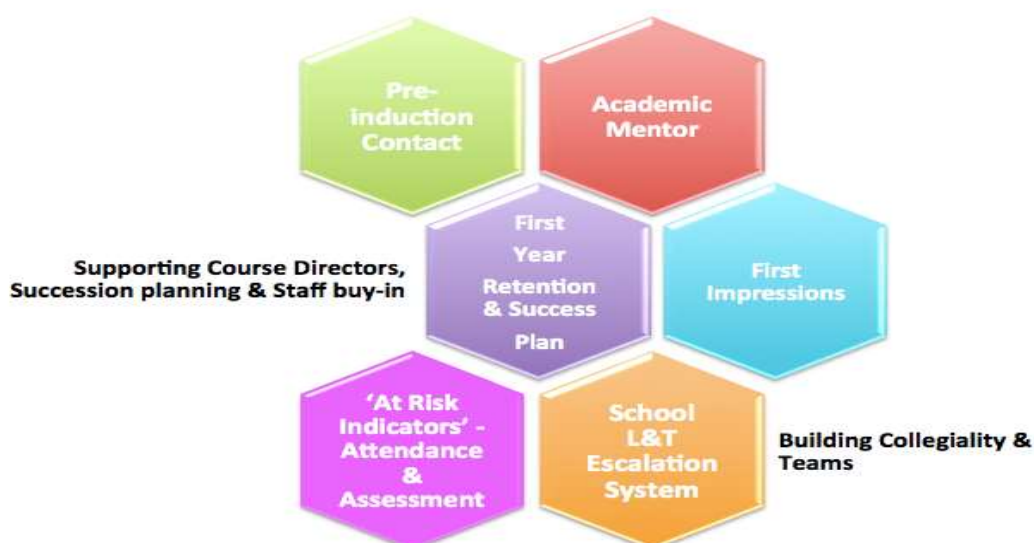
ACADEMIC MENTORS

From our initial discussions and feedback from students we realised that the traditional studies advice offered was limited and often piecemeal lacking consistency and often too late in terms of acting as an effective retention mechanism. The studies advice system also did not fully support the goals of the discipline team in that, for example, it did not include pre-induction contact. In response the new Academic Mentoring system has embedded with the role of the Mentor as a central element of the first year experience to: support transition to university across the first year on a linear two-semester basis and bridging the semester 1/2 break from formal studies; the need for an informed and strategic approach to retention – we need to know our students and how they are managing their studies on an on-going basis so that we may work towards maximising students success; the traditional studies advice model could be quite prescriptive and staged and in some cases approached as a box ticking exercise. The Academic Mentoring role goes beyond studies advice; running from pre-induction contact to end of year one.

Academic Mentor: Central to the First Year Experience
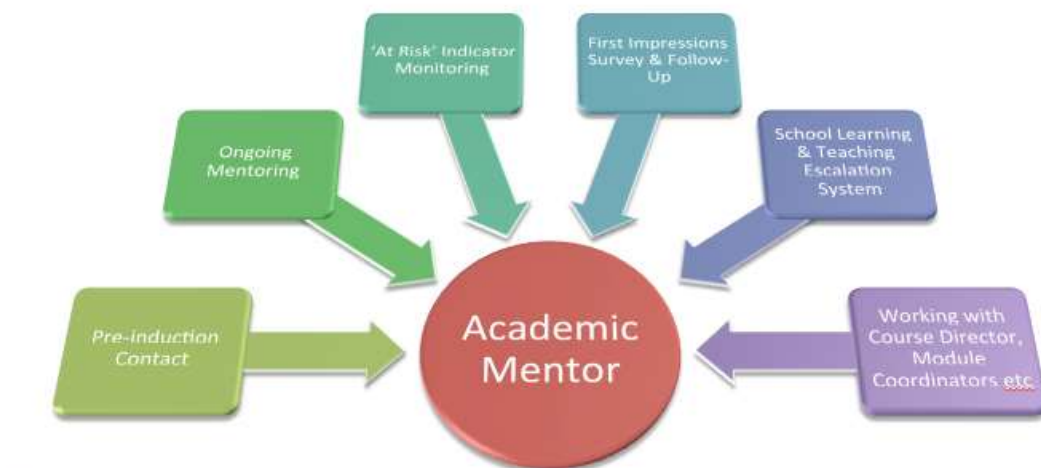
Academic Mentors are members of the course teaching teams, where possible staff who teach the students within their first year, and have programme knowledge. The Mentors are in place to act as a guiding hand as a student moves through their transition to the completion of their first year. The Academic Mentors are proactive in making contact with the student, are responsive to addressing student queries and reinforce their availability to their assigned students to ensure on-going and effective communication and relationships are built from a very early stage.

The Academic Mentors have implemented a ***communication and engagement strategy*** with their students to help the students make the transition to university; identify difficulties/problems early to allow interventions to be put in place and to help develop, build and deepen belonging to their programmes of study; enhance the student experience; build relationships with staff and peers and to pro-actively identify 'students at risk' from as early as week 0.

Critical to the work of the Academic Mentors has been ***pre-entry contact***, usually by telephone, with students. Taking on board the learning from contributions such as that of Thomas (2011) who recognised the value of pre-entry interventions in improving retention and success this very early personal contact was specifically designed to begin to:

- develop and build a sense of belonging in advance of studies;
- encourage students to begin thinking about making the active transition to university;
- encourage students to begin planning for their transition to university and to begin to feel part of the university;
- break down any initial pre-university nerves;
- ensure that pre-entry information has been clear and understood;
- develop early staff-student relationships; and
- help students to identity with a staff member who was also a core part of induction activities.

The work of the Academic Mentors has been complemented by a new approach to ***attendance monitoring***. The Academic Mentors monitor attendance on a weekly basis and then work with the respective Course Director within the School to decide upon relevant and appropriate actions for any student who is absent without reason. They also detect patterns of non-attendance and non-engagement which may hinder student success. In addition, we have implemented a new **early warning assessment indicator** of students being at risk of not completing their first year of studies successfully as non-submission of coursework was a significant contributor to the failing of first year by students.

Academic Mentor meetings with students manage student expectations whist also introducing them to academic requirements and standards and work towards creating partnerships to bring about transformative learning experiences.

The Academic Mentors also form a Student Engagement Team which reviews plans, progress and issues arising and amend actions and approaches as necessary. These systems and the Academic Mentors' involvement has proven invaluable from a School and individual programme perspective.

The work of the Academic Mentor also aligns closely to the repository and design of induction in week 0. Drawing upon evidence from What Works? Student retention and success change programme Stage 1 (2012) alongside having a key focus of creating student belonging we have moved away from being highly process and policy driven with corporate information and content (see core importance of induction in Harvey and Drew, 2006). The focus therefore has moved from information overload to focusing on the building of "getting to know". Many of the new activities are now focused on student-student interactions and group work to help build student-student relationships and friendships an element discussed by Foster et al (2011, 2012) as being important in encouraging students who have considered withdrawing from the programme to remain. This was also a core finding from the What Works? Student retention and success change programe where 75% of students were found to be worried about making friends at university (Andrews et al, 2012).

The core aims of induction are now, that:

- Every student should know by first name at least three other students in the class;
- Every student should feel comfortable entering a room of their peers and be able to sit down and feel comfortable;
- Every student should know the names of their core team and, in particular, their Course Director and Academic Mentor.

In brief, these strategic initiatives when combined, are allowing course teams to build a profile of those students that can be considered 'at risk' of not completing their first year studies. Tailored actions specific to the student's circumstances can then put in place to ensure that we work to support student success. Fundamentally, this approach is strongly aligned to the creation of student belonging and developing student identity with their programme and studies. Vallerrand (2008) related belonging to connectedness with Baumeister and Leary (1995) arguing that belonging is developed by regular and on-going contact which provides stability within the relationship. In brief, Tinto (2008) argued that in essence "access without support is not opportunity".

Evidence of impact

The combined impact of these measures are clear and evidence can be drawn from focus groups interviews with staff and students, a post induction questionnaire alongside institutional data including that relating to attrition and student success. Success includes: a reduction in early leavers across programmes; early transfer of students onto more appropriate courses of study; stronger relationships with students; better understanding of the issues affecting individual students and working to signpost and support students in a timely manner; enhanced working with University departments.

University data from Semester 1 2014-2015 clearly demonstrates the significant and positive impact that this range of initiatives has brought for the School with the semester 1 attrition rate for the Built Environment falling from 9.3% 2013-2014 to 6.6% 2014-2015. Looking at full year comparisons retention significantly improved within the School with attrition in 2014-2015 falling to 14% in comparison to 22% in 2013-2014.

When looking solely at the original 3 programmes included in the project retention has improved in the courses with, for example, Building Engineering and Materials reduced from 36 to 30% from 2012-13 to 2014-15. Construction Engineering and Management retention in 2013-14 was 33% in comparison to 21% in 2014-15 this marks a significant reduction in attrition with the actual number of students exiting the programme reducing from 14 to 5. Building Surveying has seen the most marked reduction in attrition moving from 25% in 2012-13 to 5% in 2014-15.

There has also been an improvement in the Building Surveying and Building Engineering and Materials courses in relation to student success at the first attempt. Across the 2012-13, 2013-14 and 2014-15 academic years Building Surveying recorded 83%, 100% and 86% respectively under this indicator with Building Engineering and Materials recording 63%, 75% and 76%.

Using the data from the Belonging Survey issued as part of the project it is interesting to note the trend within the Built Environment subject where significant increases in engagement and self-confidence of students can be seen and particularly in the self-confidence area. Indeed, looking at data from the 2014-2015 academic year self-confidence in first year students. An example of this can be found in Building Surveying students who mean self-confidence rating in 2014-2015 increased from 3.73 to 3.92 with engagement increasing from 3.81 to 4.38. This is in comparison to the national data which shows only a small percentage increase in self-confidence data (mean 3.51 to 3.53).

The retention plan in essence has embedded a number of enablers which have worked to significantly enhance communication with our student whilst nurturing both academic and social aspects, particularly in the transition and settling into the higher education environment. Evidence drawn from focus groups with students confirms that 'relationships' with the assigned Academic Mentor, lecturers and peers are the pivotal factor to settling into university life and therefore fulfilling their academic and social needs. Student's views on the Academic Mentor initiative can be summarised as being a:

> *great idea, get to know that person really well and they get to know you, have a point of contact throughout*

> *(Year 1 student)*

This contact and face-to-face interactions with Academic Mentors is valued by students and it is clear from focus group evidence that students experience a high quality and consistent communication with their Academic Mentor and view them as being approachable and available. This appears to have helped students settle into the course as well as provided a sense of engagement throughout the semester:

> *Yeah we see him every Thursday. He had a meeting with everyone in the class in the first semester to see how they are getting on and talk through stuff with him and finding out how they are getting on in the course and stuff like that*

> *(Year 1 student)*

The impact can also be seen in the evidence gathered from Academic Mentors:

> *… the academic mentoring meetings… 2 students had some reservations about university and their ability, both were considering different options. The meeting give us a good chance to sit down and discuss these options. In follow up both have confirmed they are happy and it was just transition nerves. If standard studies advice timetables were held I feel that these students could have been missed and may have dropped out as a result*

> *(Mentor No. 1).*

In addition, the move of induction activities into week 0 have been warmly welcomed by both staff and students, staff principally as they could spend dedicated time meeting and working with year one students. Qualitative research resoundingly established across all the programmes that students valued the inclusion of induction activities on week 0 noting *"I would rather come in and do what we did" rather than to come in and commence class in week 1"*. The resounding reasons for this was that the students have been able to actively engage with induction activities which were often team/group focused and they could also could clearly see how they were designed to help them begin to build friendships within the class group and to get to know core staff members for their programme.

Evidence also demonstrates clear examples of the impact of non-engagement with induction can have with students becoming isolated from the rest of their class as noted:

> *There is a group of us who have really got to know each other and then there are people outside that don't really interact...We don't really see them much.*

> *(Year 1 Student)*

Students have also described how they "feel sorry for" those students who did not attend induction as they feel that they missed out on the opportunity to make friends at an early juncture. Evidence also demonstrates that peer support is vital whilst settling into university life as when asked, *what do you think it's been that's helped you settle in and stay here? The response was "... Friends, Friends".*

In terms of building early belonging evidence can be drawn from the week 2/3 early intervention questionnaire which found, in the three programmes initially included in the project, that 100%, 100% and 97% of students stating that they either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I feel confortable with my classmates and feel part of my class". When asked whether they felt comfortable with their lecturers the response rate was also extremely high with a response rate of 95%, 95% and 100% respectively.

A really positive but perhaps unseen perspective of the Academic Mentoring initiative was in relation to staff job satisfaction as evidenced below:

> *I have genuinely enjoyed getting to know our year 1 students and despite the enormous amount of paperwork, it has contributed to my job satisfaction and I believe enhanced the quality of the year 1 experience.*

> *(Mentor No .2)*

Sustainability

This work is now embedded within the School and we have developed a culture of seeking to extend and develop this really positive start. As a further development we are currently involved in a University funded Collaborate project. ASPIRE: Assistive Student Profiling for Improved Retention and Engagement where we are using a combination of student and Academic Mentors across three schools along with current staff mentors from Built Environment, and university staff from all faculties and departments. In the project we are carrying out comparative research into:

1. the effective use of student profiling to identify students at risk of leaving the university and

2. combining sports psychological and employability skills training to design pro-active support and personal development sessions for first year students at risk of leaving the university.

Through the development of psychological profiling and employability skills training for students within this project affords an opportunity to develop student's sense of belonging, motivation and self-belief.

Lessons learnt

There are a number of lessons learnt which may be helpful:

- The role of academics in supporting the first year experience is critical. Separating the functions of attendance monitoring for example from academics may lead to a fracturing of potential relationships that can be developed between staff and students;
- Effective induction cannot be carried out alongside a normal teaching schedule – it needs to be standalone;
- It is critical to have a plan B in relation to the integration of students who did not or could not attend induction. Evidence from these students has told us that this can be very challenging and with some students dropping out of University as they feel they have missed out and can't fit in. This can be prevented but must be planned for as it is easy to forget about this element until its too late;
- Never assume! There have been a number of times during the project where we have learnt this lesson including:
  - assuming the email addresses of students for pre-induction contact are correct and active when we found they often were not.
  - Assuming that by week 6 students in a class know all of their classmates by name.
- You can't measure all the benefits in statistics. In fact statistics often don't demonstrate the extent and positive impact that work in this area can have. It is also important to be patient as it often takes time for change to happen.

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