

What Works? Student Retention & Success



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Addressing Student Expectations and Building Confidence for the study of Law through a Pre-Arrival Activity

Rationale for the case study

There is widespread recognition that, for new first year students making the transition to university, there are significant issues in relation to student engagement and belonging (Tinto 1993; Trowler and Trowler 2010; Trowler 2012; Tinto 2012; Thomas 2012). Coates advocates that responsibility for student engagement lies with both individual students and their institutions (Coates, 2005). It requires both 'quality of effort' on the part of students to participate in activities developed for them and also for institutions to consider the needs of their students and respond accordingly. In a review undertaken with first year Law students the Ulster Law School discovered that students were feeling challenged early in the programme with: independent learning, the amount of reading, feelings of bewilderment and the demands of university study. Staff recognised that there was a mis-match between staff and students' expectations in relation to the learning and teaching of the LLB programme. As a result of this review the Ulster Law School proactively introduced interventions to enhance the pre-entry, induction and transition experiences of students in order to address the issues highlighted.

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

Building on recommendations identified in the HERE Project Toolkit developed as part of the What Works? Student Retention and Success programme (Phase 1), the School pioneered the use of a pre-arrival activity, to focus on confidence building and preparation for the study of law and university life in general. This case study will demonstrate that early engagement at the pre-entry stage of the student journey enhances the transition process and is crucial in fostering confidence in first year students both in terms of adapting to a less structured learning environment as well as learning new skills.

In the 2013/14 academic year we introduced a pre-arrival activity which was given to all incoming law students. This comprised a short case on a topical issue (employment appeal tribunal case on disability discrimination) which new students had to read and be prepared to discuss as an ice-breaker activity, with studies advisors and PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions) students during the newly structured week 0 induction programme. This was designed to contextualise the law degree for new students and feed into their induction activities. The School was keen to ensure a proactive and developmental approach that would enhance students' confidence in their subject, give students the opportunities to start to build supportive networks and to engender a sense of belonging in a learning community within the School of Law. Ongoing academic support was then provided throughout year 1 in the form of legal writing clinics, case note clinics, feed forward sessions, court visit and focused library sessions.

The new induction programme, in general, and more specifically the pre-arrival activity, was evaluated using both quantitative and qualitative methods including focus groups, and questionnaires. The activities that we implemented in 2013-14 were expected to change student/staff attitudes or behaviour in the following way:

- Embed belongingness
- Raise student awareness of work involved in reading Law
- Help students feel more confident and motivated to study law
- Facilitate relationship building between staff and students/students and higher year peers

Through evaluation (impact and contextual) we found that:

- The majority of students felt they were confident to study law
- Students felt studies advisors were encouraging and supportive
- Students wanted more 'socialisation'
- Some students did not appear to place the same value on the pre-arrival activity as staff did with some indicating they 'did not see the point' of it
- Students had difficulty finding their way around campus

From the staff perspective, the pre-arrival activity was viewed as pivotal in helping students acclimatise to the study of law. Initially, this did not seem to achieve the result we were looking for. Focus groups, run with the new first years, asked them to think back to the pre-arrival activity and to outline what their reaction to it was when they received it. A clear theme emerged in that students felt overwhelmed and terrified at dealing with this new task with one commenting 'that was scary. I fully panicked when I saw it, and felt thrown in at the deep end quite quickly'.

Further, it became apparent that the students did not see the relevancy of the task due to their own lack of skills and the fact that clear direction on the task had not been given. One commented that 'I found it difficult to understand as I had never done anything like it before.' Another claimed 'I thought it was irrelevant doing it because I did not know what to do'. The main challenges students encountered when trying to read the case was that they did not understand the nature of the task. Whilst many found the activity daunting and off putting, others did appreciate that it gave them an insight into the requirements for the study of law saying 'It was a confidence boost because when you got something right it made you feel like 'yeah I can do this'.'

Staff were understandably disappointed that the pre-arrival activity did not have the effect they had anticipated. However, as this was a focused programme of change, meetings were set up with the course team to reflect upon the activities used and to consider the evaluation results. Listening to the student voice has been critical and in light of student feedback the pre-arrival activity was amended in the 2014/15 academic year. Focus group feedback had indicated that students clearly struggled with the pre-arrival activity. In order to make the pre-arrival activity more relevant it was amended to include a case and journal article for students to read prior to week 0 induction. Further, to clarify the activity for the students, specific guidance was drawn up on 'how to read a case' and 'how to read an article'. Rather than using a random case, the case was chosen specifically as it would be explored in the semester 1 Introduction to Law module, a core module for all Law students and one that laid the foundations for their Law studies. It would also be explored in a semester 2 module, Criminal Law. This was to ensure that the students would see the relevancy of undertaking the pre-arrival activity in relation to the continuation of their Law studies in general. Also the case was chosen specifically because it was so interesting (it involved cannibalism and the defence of necessity) and was likely to capture the students' attention thus helping to motivate them to read.

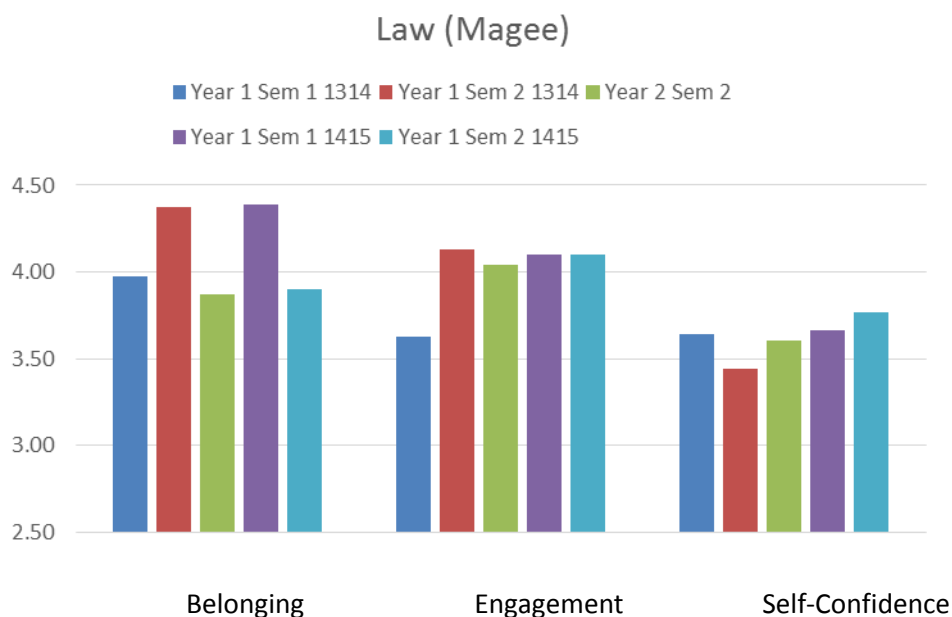
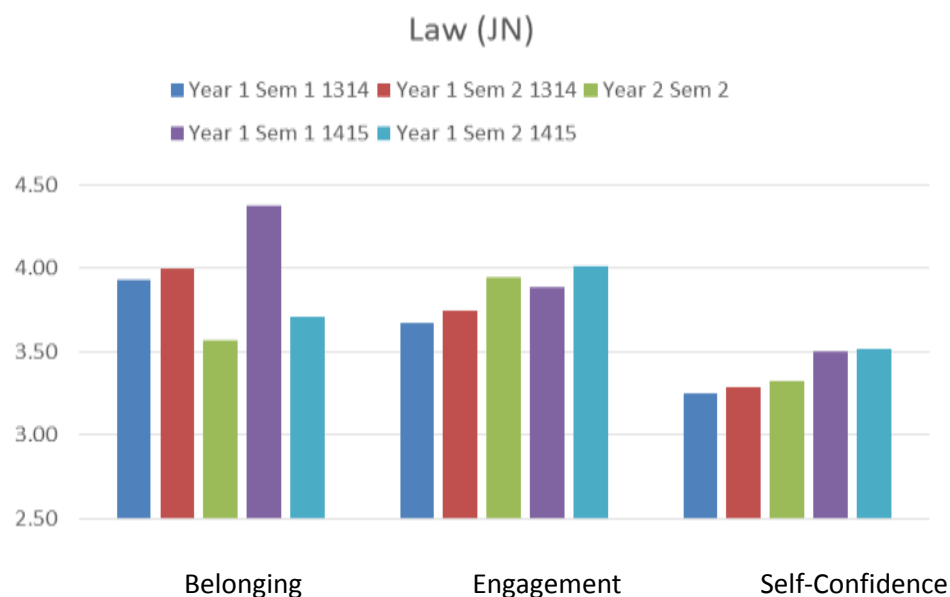
Evidence of impact

University attrition data for the Ulster Law School shows a positive trend. Whilst the rate for the Magee campus increased in 2014/15, the actual number of students was the same as the previous year but as the cohort was smaller the % figure was higher. Significantly, there is 0% attrition for Magee for the current academic year.

Programme	First year attrition 2012/13	Target first year attrition rate 2013/14	Actual first year attrition rate 2013/14 (= actual no of students)	Actual first year attrition rate 2014/15 (= actual no of students)	Actual first year attrition rate 2015/16 (Semester 1) (= actual no of students)
LLB at JN	11.8%	12%	14.5% (8/55)	12.5% (5/40)	11.4% (4/35)
LLB at MG	9.7%	12%	19.4% (7/36)	21.2% (7/33)	0% (0/29)

With regard to academic achievement, the failure rate for the core skills development module in semester one of year one (Introduction to Law) on both campuses has also reduced. At Jordanstown, the failure rate has dropped from 26.5% in 2013/14 to 16% in 2015/16. At Magee, the rate has dropped from 18.9% in 2013/14 to 6.7% in 2015/16.

The Belonging survey administered as part of the What Works? Student retention and success change programme shows that, whilst Law students do not feel overly confident about their studies, they do feel a sense of belonging and are engaged with their discipline (see graphs below). This is consistent with our own findings. Law is one of the most independent subjects to be studied at University with low class contact time (approximately 9 hours per week) and extensive demands placed on the students regarding independent study. For students making the transition from a School environment where traditionally much support will have been given, this can be a very daunting experience. Students are expected to acquire new skills in legal thinking and writing for which they will have had no prior experience. While our students enter with high entry grades (typically ABB or above at Jordanstown and BBB or above at Magee) students often struggle with the independent nature of a Law degree and this undoubtedly has an impact on their self-confidence.



In order to assess the effectiveness of the use of the pre-arrival activity, specifically, a questionnaire was administered in the second week of semester 1. The aim of the questionnaire was to explore students' overall experiences and attitudes to the pre-arrival activity. Students were asked, for example, to indicate their agreement with statements about how they found the pre-arrival activity and how it made them feel, on a 5 point Likert scale anchored 'Strongly Agree', 'Agree', 'Neutral', 'Disagree', and 'Strongly Disagree'.

The results are shown below in % for how students found the pre-arrival activity:

		SA	A	N	D	SD
1	Helped to clarify the standards of work expected	27	65	8		
2	Valuable in helping to prepare for how to study law	31	51	18		
3	Workload was too heavy; it was all too much too soon	3	3	23	46	25
4	Feel more confident about studying law	14	54	28	3	1
5	Feel motivated to study law	43	49	6	2	

A large proportion of 1st year law students thought the pre-arrival activity had successfully prepared them for their course of study. This is evident in satisfaction ratings given for each individual question asked. Clarification of work standards was widely believed to be useful for students (92%; SA: 27%, A: 65%). Only a small percentage within the sample felt neutral about what was expected from them (8%) perhaps indicating that they were unsure or ambivalent as to the standard of work expected. Value was placed on preparation for studying law with over 80% of students agreeing that that the pre-arrival was useful in providing insight on study techniques for the academic year (SA: 31%, A: 51%). This high percentage can allow for the assumption that students will be prepared to perform well during their first year. Challenging workloads can sometimes be enough to throw undergraduates off striving academically. This does not appear to be the case with over 70% of the sample disagreeing that it was all too much too soon. On the other hand, some more than others (SA: 3%, A: 3%) felt the workload was too demanding and 23% remained neutral; it may be that these particular sets of students had not yet adjusted to education at university or are still unaware of what to expect.

Confidence levels were respectable with over two thirds of the students (SA: 14%, A: 54%) feeling their learning abilities were compatible with the requirements of the course. Just over a quarter of the sample results remained indeterminate about their confidence. However, it is apparent that confidence levels do not affect student motivation attitudes toward studying law. 92% of responses (SA:43 %, A: 49%) scored this question positively while the neutral sector received only 6% of responses and no frequencies were recorded for the strongly disagree column.

When asked what their initial reaction was to the pre-arrival activity most students indicated they were excited and hopeful. Some, however, expressed anxiety at the thought of having to undertake the task. One commented '*I was shocked that we had work to do before starting but as I read through it, it was very interesting*'. It was reassuring to see that even when a student indicated that their initial reaction was one of worry and anxiety, completion of the task was meant that '*it wasn't*

as bad as I had initially thought'. It is understandable for students to be apprehensive and worried about something they have not dealt with before and any pre-arrival activity is a challenging task. However, with the right support in place the benefits of a pre-arrival activity are manifold. The exercise can help students focus on their studies, at a time when most of them have had several months off from studying after completion of A'levels. When asked to indicate the thing they found most helpful about the pre-arrival activity one student commented that *'It prepared me for what was coming and got me into the study mode again after the summer'*. Students clearly appreciated the direction that was provided with the pre-arrival activity with many commenting that the most helpful thing was *'the guidance which was given with the case and article'*. The fact that the students knew they would have the opportunity to discuss the materials in the debrief session at induction also provided reassurance for them. Further, the fact that they were able to undertake the activity in the privacy of their own home and were able to work through the materials at their own pace, made the task less daunting.

Notwithstanding the positive overall response to the pre-arrival activity, certain challenges were encountered. When asked to identify the thing they found most challenging, a common theme that emerged. Some students struggled with the legal language, summarising a large amount of text and being asked to think critically. These challenges were to be expected as the development of key legal skills is something that evolves over the duration of the degree. We would not expect students to have the key skills of understanding the language or being able to condense volumes of text to succinct points. The aim of the task was to introduce them to a new way of thinking. The objectives were to try and engage students in logical reasoning, to encourage them to discriminate between what is important and unimportant, to identify the key issues affecting a particular problem and finally to start to analyse information and reach conclusions – all key skills that will be developed throughout their degree.

Staff feedback has also been very positive. Colleagues teaching on the first year of the degree are extremely enthusiastic about the usefulness of the activity as a means of clarifying student expectations. One colleague commented, *'I think the pre-arrival activity was a useful tool to make students aware of the expectations and demands of the course in a way that could not be conveyed by simply telling them that a law degree involves a lot of reading and critical thinking'*. Further, it appears that the benefits to students comprise essential skills development essential to their discipline. Staff have commented that students start to practice a way learning that is *'concomitant to the course from the outset and obtain a sense of what their study will be like whilst, at the same time, engaging the student in independent learning, conducting research and working with peers towards a specified goal. Pertinently, the pre-arrival activity also encouraged students to meaningfully engage and 'think' about the course'*. The value of the task in promoting student learning by doing or active learning was clearly recognised with one colleague commenting *'the activity helped students engage early with the course in both a group and community setting and helped to focus the students on the course in that it provided a glimpse of the aspects and functions of reading for a Law Degree in a learning setting but also provided an opportunity for students to start to practise working independently'*.

With regard to enhancing student confidence and motivation, one colleague observed that *'the pre-arrival activities and discussions around expectations have contributed to a highly motivated and prepared cohort. It is rare that students will come to class without having read the materials'*. Discussion of the pre-arrival activity in the debrief sessions at induction allowed students to develop an awareness of the skills they would need to develop and to overcome initial anxiety about undertaking the task. As one colleague commented, *'through the debrief sessions, the tutor was able*

to explore and provide feedback on the students engagement with a series of research, reading and analytical tasks which helped to engage the students with the discipline, particularly due to the unique and topical nature of the activity...the students said they felt his helped them to understand what they had to do in the future and whilst some initially said they struggled with the task that they now felt more confident'.

First year teaching staff were also asked whether they thought it was worth continuing the pre-arrival activity. This question elicited an overwhelmingly positive response. It was summed up by one colleague who commented that it was *'an extremely valuable approach in terms of interaction, relationship-building, peer support and learning and engagement with the course'*. This case study demonstrates that the use of a pre-arrival activity as part of a comprehensive induction programme has many benefits. It helps students become emotionally engaged, in terms of developing interest, enjoyment and a sense of belonging; and further cognitively engaged, in that they are invested in their learning. The key themes emerging from our evaluation indicate that a pre-arrival activity can:

- engender excitement for the subject
- enhance students' confidence and motivation for their discipline
- help to clarify expectations about the standard of work expected
- assist in the preparation for how to study the discipline

Sustainability

Evaluation and student feedback shows that this activity, when managed properly, clearly enhances student confidence and motivation. The School continues to foster a growth-promoting climate to engender student learning, and building meaningful relationships between teaching staff and students. The new induction programme, incorporating the use of the pre-arrival activity has been identified as model of best practice in the Faculty. The Ulster Law School intends to develop and maintain this valuable means of engagement with students at the pre-entry stage.

Lessons learnt

After a disappointing start in 2013/14, a new induction pack was put together and posted to students in the 2014/15 academic year. This included a welcome letter, the induction schedule, pre-arrival reading materials and guidance. The new format for the pre-arrival activity has been used in the current academic year and was recently evaluated. Findings indicate that a pre-arrival activity works best when it is clearly structured, formalised and supported. It is imperative that it is followed up in the academic discipline and clearly linked to students' further studies across the first year. In 2013/14 we initially distributed an isolated case that was not linked to the students' first year studies. As a result students did not see the relevancy of the activity. Students were also unsure of what they were doing and why they were doing it. It became apparent that how staff approached the task was also key to the success of the activity. How staff managed the debrief sessions with the students was crucial in getting the students to understand the nature of the task set and its relevancy. Initial differences in how the debrief sessions were run at induction meant that the student experience differed and this impacted on the usefulness of the activity. In 2014/15, to address the issues identified in the focus groups and questionnaires, clear guidance was provided for the students. A journal article was also introduced to show the relevancy of a very old case to

modern day legal issues. The induction co-ordinator then briefed staff on the aims and objectives of the pre-arrival activity so that they were clear as to how to run the session with the new students.

In order for a pre-arrival activity to work successfully it must be clearly structured and relevant. We must also be mindful that, whilst we want to encourage independent learning, students need support and direction when undertaking the activity and accept that in most cases, a pre-arrival activity does challenge students.

References

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For full What Works? Student Retention and Success report (2017) see <https://www.phf.org.uk/publications/works-student-retention-success-full/>