

PRACTICE PAPER

Supporting Art and Design students transition into Higher Education: an ongoing project

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Introduction

A high level of student retention is widely regarded as an important factor in measuring success of Higher Education and improving retention has become a key theme for many institutions. The 2007 National Audit Office (NAO) reported that one in five full time UK HE students were failing to complete their courses but that there were wide variations between institutions in terms of withdrawal themes. The report concluded that some of the differences were likely to relate to how well individual institutions were helping students to deal with the challenges of study in HE. In the UK, a great deal of research has found retention to be related to student satisfaction, which is primarily found to be dependent upon student preparedness and their expectations of HE study (Davies and Elias 2003, Lowe and Cook 2003, Charlton *et al.* 2006). This ongoing project, aims at addressing these key issues by continuous development of an online support facility provided to students prior to start of their study (approximately 4 weeks before the first day of term).

Research methodology

The project start (May 2009) followed the ADDIE (Analyse, Design, Develop, Implementation, and Evaluation) development model (Peterson 2003) and adopted a multi-phase sequential mixed methods research strategy. Project evaluation inter-mixed findings from a focus group and several semi-structured questionnaires over five key research phases targeted at appropriate stages of the ADDIE development model (Figure 1).

Phase 1 May 2009	A focus group made up of level 5 Art & Design students took place to determine experienced transitional difficulties.
Phase 2 July 2009	Findings from the focus group were draw upon to develop an online questionnaire. This was sent out to new level 4 students yet to start their study.
Implementation	The support went live on the 24 th August 2009.
Phase 3 September 2009	New level 4 students completed an online survey to evaluate the effectiveness of the support two weeks into study.
Phase 4 October 2009	New level 4 students completed an online survey to evaluate their transition experiences six weeks into study.
Phase 5 December 2009	New level 4 students completed an online survey to discuss the their induction experiences.

Figure 1: The five research phases targeted around the ADDIE development model

Design and development

Results from Qualitative and Quantitative data collected during phases 1 & 2 was evaluated and used to inform the design and development of the support facility. Analysis found that key areas of difficulties and needs related to the highly emotive challenges of transition to HE (Austerlitz 2008) and resources were offered in order to buffer feelings of anxiety playing particular attention to peer integration and students expectations of HE study. The support was built using the HTML editor Adobe GoLive, which was then uploaded directly onto the MMU Art and Design Internet Server.

Results

Summative assessment found early support beneficial in both students academic and social integration. Key areas where the support had made a substantial difference include:

- **Early peer/tutor friendship.** An online chat facility enabled students to build both social and academic supportive networks before start of study. Students acknowledged how early support from tutors made them feel less anxious about their start.
- **University and programme expectations.** Links to various MMU welcome resources and course documents (online enrolment procedure, study skills resources, equipment and reading lists, timetables, showcase of graduate work etc) assisted students understanding of what was expected of them once they arrived.

Conclusion and recommendations

Early support has assisted students when they are most likely to make important decisions regarding their individual approach to study and retention decisions. Although it was particularly evident that mature and overseas students found the support highly assistive, it was also evident that students who failed to use the support felt disadvantaged. Where pre-entry support has made a significant difference is in helping to promote the development of valuable coping mechanisms, relatively quickly. These have worked effectively in buffering the highly stressful and emotional process of transition to university. The following suggestions are advisable during development and delivery of such support:

1. Students need to be made aware of the importance of preparing for HE and encouraged to fully engage with the opportunity. This is a difficult area and it is recommended that individual programmes take on this responsibility. During the project texting, email and use of social networks were found to be beneficial towards this particular problem.
2. Where possible, access to pre-entry support provision should be simple and trouble free.
3. Students should receive an invite to support at least 4 weeks prior to starting study to ensure the appropriate level of engagement takes place.
4. Online support and any web pages should be relatively easy to navigate, provision of instructional guidelines is highly recommended.

References

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