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## **Increasing Retention Rates of New Students by Improving the Induction Process**

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### **Abstract**

The effective induction of students new to any programme can mean the difference between retaining and losing them. Not all students need, or even want, a formal induction programme but experience to date has shown that none of them has suffered by being included in one. The benefits to both the student and the Department of an integrated induction and student support programme cannot be understated and the following case study accurately reflects the approach used by the Department of Built Environment at the University of Central Lancashire.

**Keywords:** Induction, Retention, Student Support

## Good Practice Points

- Providing an effective means of inducting large numbers of students, efficiently.  
  
(Student quotes on the best features of the Induction Programme)
- 'Meeting fellow students & class tutor in an environment that was not purely academic based which allowed for less formal interaction & opportunity to build good relationships' Student 4
- 'Dividing people into random groups was an ideal way of students getting to know one another' Student 15
- 'The opportunity to work with course colleagues and build a rapport with them from an early stage' Student 17
- 'Putting people into groups where they didn't know any one made people make friends' Student 18
- 'Being put into teams and learning about each other through group tasks – even if we didn't win!' Student 23

## Introduction

Universities have experienced a significant increase in the number of entrants on to undergraduate courses over the last decade, the direct result of the inclusive policies adopted by recent governments. This, in turn, has increased the number of non-standard and academically challenged students entering higher education. A direct consequence of these policies has been an increase in the number of students who fail to complete the course they enrolled upon.

The Department of Built Environment at the University of Central Lancashire has traditionally enjoyed a moderate level of recruitment, but as a result of the changing profile of its first year student intake, has experienced problems of increased numbers of students withdrawing from the course. The Department undertook a review of its provision for new students, in an attempt to reverse the trend of increasing student withdrawal. The following case study outlines the steps taken by the Department to resolve the underlying issues affecting its students and thus improve the retention rate for new students.

## Investigation

When a student withdraws from any course a Withdrawal Form must be completed by the Course Leader; one of the questions on the form tries to establish the principal reason for the student leaving, finance, travel, work, wrong course, etcetera or personal. Most of the students elect to answer this by selecting the option 'Personal', thus avoiding any further detailed questions. With the only reliable empirical data relating to the actual numbers of withdrawn students, the Department undertook an internal investigation into the problem of poor retention of first year full-time students, whilst at the same time monitoring attendance. All students opting to withdraw were interviewed by an academic counsellor to try and establish the real reasons for their withdrawal.

Virtually all of the students withdrawing from the first year are full-time students, very few part-time students withdraw, perhaps due to the fact that they are being sponsored by employers within the construction industry and are thus attending the university as day-release students. Failure to complete will almost certainly affect their employment and, as a result, part-time students only tend to withdraw if their employment conditions change.

The investigation revealed that the principal reason for student withdrawal was one of isolation; they had failed to be engaged by the University, the Department, or their fellow students. This presented itself most notably in a lower level of attendance at time-tabled classes and social events, which fed the downward spiral of disillusionment which had started the moment they enrolled in the Department, ultimately resulting in withdrawal from the course.

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## **Solution**

The Department, having clearly identified the principal reason for withdrawal, determined to ensure that all new students should be integrated into the Department as early and completely as possible.

The solution was to create the role of First Year Tutor whose responsibility would be to co-ordinate all matters affecting the first year students and to establish a coherent and comprehensive induction programme and support system to reverse the increasing trend for students to withdraw.

## **The Strategy of Induction**

The primary purpose of induction at all universities is to introduce the new students to their place of learning, the buildings, the people and the student societies. This process typically lasts one week and then the students are deemed ready to start their studies. However, the philosophy of the Built Environment at the University of Central Lancashire extends this to include an introduction to their fellow students. The first week still revolves around the traditional activities, but is group focused. The second week is used to cement the sense of group identity, and therefore belonging, with a group based project. The Student Study Groups system of pastoral care being firmly embedded by this fortnight of induction.

## **Induction Fortnight – Week 1**

### **Monday**

The first phase of the induction programme begins with the first year full-time undergraduate students instructed to attend a pre-enrolment talk by the Head of Department and First Year Tutor at 9.30am on the first Monday of 'Induction Fortnight'. This ensures that from their very first contact with the Department each one of them can see that they are part of a 'larger family' of students. All of the Course Leaders are present at the talk and after the welcome by the Head of Department and First Year Tutor they take their students on a guided tour of the facilities. The rest of the first day is spent on enrolment, registration and familiarisation with the department. During enrolment the students have to complete a simple Student's Details form which together with a passport sized photograph is given to the First Year Tutor.

### **Tuesday**

Overnight the First Year Tutor takes the Student's Details forms and sorts the students into their Student Study Groups (SSG). Student Study Groups consist of between 6 and 8 students with as many of the courses represented in each group as student numbers allow. Students are allocated to a SSG on a random basis, the only intervention in the process being to ensure that female students and smokers are in a SSG with a least one other female student or smoker in it. The importance of this system being in place from the second day of enrolment cannot be overstated. The mutual support offered by fellow students,

This case study was commissioned and funded by the Centre for Education in the Built Environment provided it is adequately monitored and nurtured, is the most effective way of embedding the new student into university life.

The students arrive at 9.30 am to be informed of their SSG and the first task is to 'ice-break' the SSGs. A variety of simple tasks are used, the sole aim being to ensure that by the end of the session the students are talking to each student in their SSG, know every member of their SSG and has their contact details written in their Student Organiser.

The second phase of the induction process begins with the first of the inter-SSG challenges, 'Bridge Building'. This activity requires the SSGs to design and build a paper bridge (criteria set) and is the first of the competitive activities.

(During the first week of induction there are 4 challenges for the SSGs to compete in and score points. The points are carried forward to the second week at the end of which there is a prize for the 'best' SSG).

The second inter-SSG challenge takes place after lunch and is called simply 'Town & Country' (provided courtesy of CITB) in which an estate of houses for a greenfield site has to be designed.

### **Wednesday**

The day starts with a 'Professional Talk' when members of the local branches of the professional bodies together with past graduates (now in industry) give presentations about the professional aspects of the courses and encourage the students to become Student Members of the various professional bodies.

The afternoon sees the third of the inter-SSG challenges 'Morrison City' (provided by CITB) taking place. The students have to design and then construct a development of housing estates and shopping mall.

### **Thursday**

The morning is taken up with introductory sessions to the university computer intranet systems and group meetings with the First Year Tutor in his capacity as Personal Tutor to start the system of pastoral care. The afternoon is taken up by Freshers Fair activities run by the Students Union.

### **Friday**

The morning sees the final SSG challenge of the week, this is the Conflict exercise.

The Department hosts a buffet for the Freshers and staff of the department, a chance for the staff to 'meet and greet' the new students over lunch. After lunch the students gather in the lecture theatre with the Head of Department, First Year Tutor and Course Leaders to review the week's activities and find out what the second week of induction has in store for them.

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## **Induction Fortnight – Week 2**

### **Monday**

The first year core lectures are all time-tabled to take place on a Monday. The second Monday of induction fortnight is used to introduce the students to their module tutors, who use their first core lecture to describe their module and discuss its delivery, along with any special features the students will need to complete the module; assessment, reading lists and other resources are discussed.

### **Tuesday**

The students gather in their SSGs to be given the task for the second week. The SSGs are tasked with producing a report on a topical matter which they have to present, using PowerPoint, to the rest of the students and staff of the department on Friday afternoon. The report and presentation are judged by the Head, Course Leaders and invited guests with each member of the winning team receiving a prize.

The students must organise their SSG activities for the week to ensure that they submit their report on time and present using Powerpoint. During the course of the week each SSG has to arrange its own Library Induction Tour, they must also attend another meeting with the First Year Tutor to discuss their progress.

### **Wednesday**

This is the day set aside by the University for the Students Union to hold its 'Clubs & Societies Day' and as such no specific department activities are allowed.

### **Thursday**

The students are working on their reports and presentations with staff available in the department to help if it is requested. The meetings with the First Year Tutor take place throughout the day, issues checked with students include accommodation, finance, enrolment, library induction, course selection and PDP.

### **Friday**

The Student Support Groups present their reports to the judging panel and then give their PowerPoint presentation to the other first year students and staff of the department. Following the presentations the winning SSG is presented with the 'prize' and the Head of Department brings 'Induction Fortnight' to a close; as the students leave they collect their semester time-tables.

## **Evaluation**

All Universities have induction programmes of some description, however the Department of Built Environment has developed a programme that is unique within the University and would appear to be unique in the UK. The Department has seen retention of first year full-time

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undergraduate students rise from approximately 75% at its lowest point to currently in excess of 81%, a significant increase, due almost entirely to the efforts of the Department to introduce practices which ensure that the new student is engaged with the fellow students and staff of the Department from the moment they arrive. All courses are incorporated in the Induction Programme except for foundation degree programmes. Figure 1 below shows retention rates for courses included, while Figure 2 below provides a comparison between included and excluded courses.

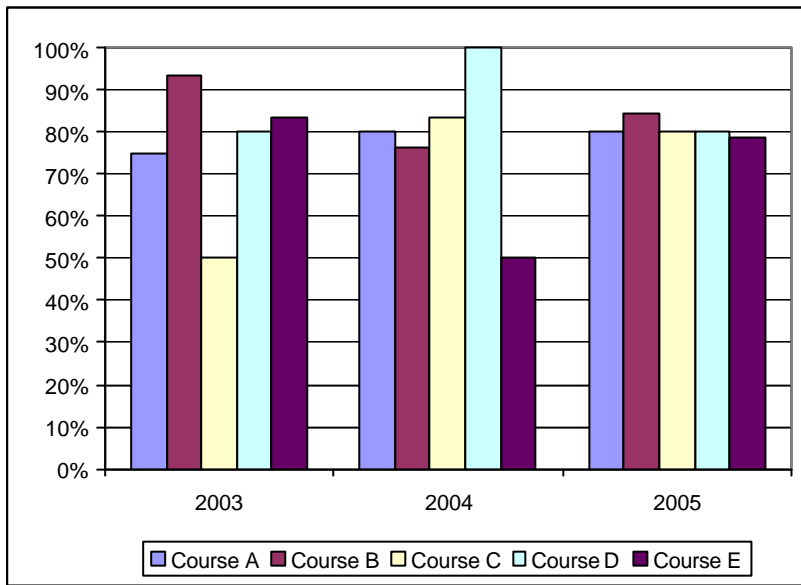


Figure 1 Retention Rates for courses included in the Induction Programme

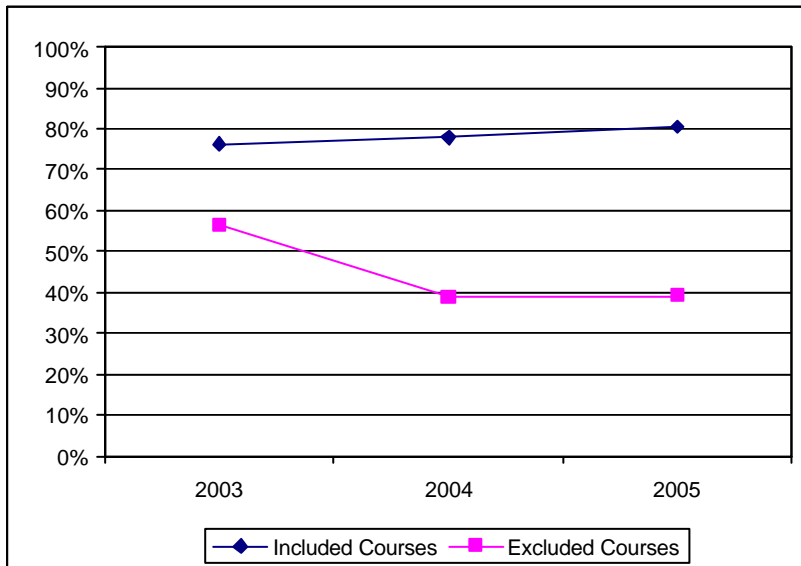


Figure 2. A comparison of average retention rates between courses involved in and excluded from the Induction Programme

The induction process and support systems used by the Department at first year level are always commented upon during review and validation, both internally and externally, and are always found to be 'best practice'.

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The Induction Programme for week 1 is reviewed formally at the end of the first week and informally during the SSG meetings with their tutor towards the end of the second week. The formal assessment asks them to comment on the 'best' and 'worst' aspects of the programme, rate the system of SSG, comment on the appropriateness of group based induction activities and finally give an overall impression of their view of the induction process.

As can be clearly seen from the evidence gathered formally by Evaluation Questionnaires (see Appendix) the students approve of the system and believe that it has helped them 'survive' the rigours of Induction. The findings have also been confirmed informally during conversation or group discussion that, almost without exception, the support and guidance provided throughout the first year as a whole has made their adjustment to life at university easier. The lessons learnt by the Built Environment are being disseminated across the Faculty. The benefits realised by the full-time students mean that, where applicable, the programme and practices will be adopted for the part-time students.

## Appendix

The Evaluation Questionnaire was distributed to all full-time first year students and 60 completed valid forms were collected, the following data and comments are wholly derived from the student returns.

### **Overall Level of satisfaction with the Induction Programme**

*93% of the students were either Happy or Very Happy (non were Unhappy)*

*Question 1 - The system of pastoral care proved to be very supportive.*

*98% of the students agreed/strongly agreed*

*Question 2 - The level of support offered by the year tutor was appropriate.*

*99% of the students agreed/strongly agreed*

*Question 3 - Sufficient meetings were held to maintain contact with the tutor.*

*96% of the students agreed/strongly agreed*

*Question 4 - Being placed into a group helped you to make friends.*

*95% of the students agreed/strongly agreed*

*Question 5 - Being in a group helped you to settle into University life.*

*95% of the students agreed/strongly agreed*

*Question 6 - The group bonded very quickly.*

*94% of the students agreed/strongly agreed*

*Question 7 - The group maintained its unity throughout the programme.*

*92% of the students agreed/strongly agreed*

*Question 8 - The group was supportive of all of its member as the need arose.*

*93% of the students agreed/strongly agreed*

*Question 9 - The group worked well on given project/tutorial work.*

*92% of the students agreed/strongly agreed*

*Question 10 - The members of your group formed factions excluding others.*

*79% of the students disagreed/strongly disagreed*

*Question 11 - The group met frequently outside of timetabled class contact time.*

*55% of the students agreed/strongly agreed*

*Question 12 - The group met infrequently outside of timetabled classes.*

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*47% of the students agreed/strongly agreed*

*Question 13 - The group never met outside of timetabled class contact time.*

*35% of the students agreed/strongly agreed*

*Question 14 - The other group members showed no interest in meeting socially.*

*77% of the students disagreed/strongly disagreed*

*Question 15 - The other group members showed no interest in interacting.*

*88% of the students disagreed/strongly disagreed*

*Question 16 - The students should have been allowed to select their own groups.*

*76% of the students disagreed/strongly disagreed*

*Question 17 - Group allocation should have been based on entry qualifications.*

*95% of the students disagreed/strongly disagreed*

*Question 18 - Group allocation should have been geographically based.*

*94% of the students disagreed/strongly disagreed*

*Question 19 - Group allocation should have been based on age.*

*95% of the students disagreed/strongly disagreed*

*Question 20 - A facility should exist for students to change groups.*

*63% of the students disagreed/strongly disagreed*