

The changing face of induction

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Introduction

Recognising the need to improve the experience and retention levels of all types of students at the University of Sussex, as a result of University and national agendas, the central administration and Schools, led by the Pro-Vice Chancellor for the Student Experience, worked together to overhaul and develop a new induction process. This required changes to the organisation of the induction period across the Schools and also required some links to be established with external bodies to achieve these aims. National research and internal reviews already undertaken at the University in the area assisted in the development of the new process.

The initiatives which made up the new induction process were developed and designed to link together and complement one another. The centre piece of the new process was the development of the '9 Strand Approach' which is a programme comprising central and School based events, the introduction of Student Advisors into the Schools to assist and support academic based student welfare, the introduction of student mentors and the extension and harmonisation of the Personal Tutoring scheme.

This paper will explain the need for change, describe the internal changes and mention some of the external links established to implement the new induction process for undergraduate students and its impact on the student experience and undergraduate retention levels. The development of the Personal Tutoring scheme will be given as an example of change within a School.

The need for change

Higher education in the past 10 years has experienced major challenges. Change in student funding, retention benchmarks and quality assurance standards have put the retention of students high up the agenda of a university. At Sussex, despite a significant improvement (6% in the past 3 years), the undergraduate non-completion rate was considered to be in need of further improvement. Three years ago, as part of the University's strategy to address the issues of retention, the student experience and widening participation, a Pro-Vice Chancellor for the Student Experience was appointed. Internal and external research was demonstrating that the 'induction' or 'orientation' of new students within an institution played an important role in the student experience which impacted on retention. For many years, it was commonly thought that the institutional infrastructure was the main factor affecting retention. However, research by authors such as Martinez and Munday (1998) as identified by the Four Counties Group of HE Institutions has challenged this belief and has found that strategies to improve *'curriculum design, pedagogy and the teacher-student and student-student relationships had a greater impact on retention than, measures to improve accommodation and equipment'* (Four Counties Group of HE Institutions, 2002).

In late autumn 2001, a review was undertaken of the undergraduate and postgraduate arrival and induction arrangements with the aim of developing and implementing a new induction process for 2003. The review was designed to take stock of induction practice across the campus and identify good practice and not as a critical review. Understanding the dynamics of retention is complex but it was acknowledged at Sussex that, as a result of the review and other external research, a redesign of the arrival and induction experience, improving a student's first impression and sense of social integration, was likely to impact on attrition rates. Although there are many aspects to improving retention rates (such as the overhaul of an institution's curriculum), arrival and induction is an area

where substantial improvements to the student experience can be made quickly. At Sussex, the number of students who withdraw prior to the end of the first term is relatively small in comparison to the number who withdraw throughout the rest of the year. However, the first term experience sets the scene for subsequent decisions. *'The first semester is a crucial time for students to start to form an identity and integrate into their chosen institution'* (Four Counties, 2002).

The reasons for the redesign to come online in 2002 were threefold. Firstly, attrition rates needed further attention. Secondly, the new School structure due in 2003 meant that the 2002 undergraduate cohort (and the upheaval they could potentially experience) represented an additional risk with regard to retention. Thirdly, it was acknowledged that student expectations regarding their higher education experience is changing. Undergraduate students of today are very different to those of a decade ago (increase in mature, international students and students from lower socio-economic classes) who experience a range of pressures they did not have to address in the past. Students are living in a consumer society where they expect value for money. They are educational consumers and, driven in part by the introduction of loans and fees, they have a heightened awareness of their role as consumers. With the anticipated introduction of top-up fees, as announced in the recent Government White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* (DfEE 2003), student criticism and dissatisfaction with regard to issues such as courses being perceived as representing poor value for money, will become more commonplace. It is reasonable to surmise that US style student expectations will be reflected in the United Kingdom.

About five years ago, acknowledging that students needed time to settle into university life before teaching starts, a week 0 (Freshers Week) was introduced. Students would arrive midweek in week 0 and teaching would start midweek of week 1. The Autumn 2001 Review looked at the induction experience for all types of students across the University. Within the undergraduate area, the review aimed to evaluate how successful this induction strategy had been over the past few years. Key players such as the Sub-Dean for Welfare, the School Administrative Officer and the Student Advisor within each School were interviewed. Undergraduate students were interviewed in groups ranging from 2 to 14. A semi-structured interview was adopted and revolved around four/five general questions exploring staff and student opinions of their induction experience. This enabled further topics, which developed out of the original questions, to be explored. Central units involved in the induction process were asked to provide written comments on the relative success of their activities.

The undergraduate findings of the Autumn 2001 Review

Staff Perspective

Staff involved in providing the induction programmes for undergraduates in Schools thought that Week 0 did not have enough activities or events in it to keep students occupied and entertained. The Students' Union provision of events in Weeks 0-1 was thought to be inadequate, and the scheduling of the undergraduate Freshers Fair in Week 1 created a clash between Union activities and academic induction and teaching. There needed to be streamlining of pre-arrival information mailings. Room bookings for induction events had also proved problematic.

Student Perspective

Students interviewed were very supportive of the need for a week designed for Freshers before the term starts, but they had significant criticisms of current practice. Pre-arrival information mailings were not well coordinated. Students wanted the opportunity to get into their accommodation before the beginning of Week 0. They would prefer more informal School activities and better organisation

of social events by the Students' Union. There was not enough to do in Week 0 or the weekend between Weeks 0 and 1. Mature and part-time undergraduates did not feel very well supported. Freshers expected Week 0 to contain academic 'orientation' (timetables, reading lists, perhaps diagnostic testing) and some 'induction', e.g. meeting with their personal tutor. In some Schools, these activities were undertaken in Week 1.

Based on these consultations, the following framework for undergraduate induction and registration began to emerge.

- Students would move into their University accommodation over the weekend before Week 0 giving them a week to settle in before teaching started.
- Registration *per se* would commence on the Monday of Week 0. More Students Union events for Freshers would be laid on in Week 0 and during the Week 0/1 weekend.
- 'Academic' induction events, at least of a basic orientation nature and ideally more than that, should begin at the end of Week 0.
- Teaching for new undergraduates would commence from the Monday of Week 1.

The aim was to produce an induction programme where there was a common structure across the Schools. It needed to provide:

- A friendly welcome from the School, and critically for 2002 entrants (who will change School after their 1st year), an equally friendly and engaging first contact with their Subject.
- A programme of academic orientation and meeting key faculty.
- Minimally bureaucratic registration.
- Appropriately pitched introductions to support services, especially Library and Computing.
- A fully structured programme of 'ice-breaking' social activities on campus.
- Help with local orientation (transport; supermarkets; compare Lewes to Brighton, etc).
- Overall coherency and continuity of activities, through the week and the week 0/1 weekend.

What Sussex did to improve its induction process

The induction programme needed to achieve a balance between academic and social events with enough activity on campus for students not to feel homesick or bored. Induction needed to '*involve all stakeholders (academic, non-academic staff and internal organisations such as the Students Union)*' (Four Counties, 2002). Importantly, a move away from the traditional induction which tended to be mainly an administrative process was needed. Internal and external research identified the importance of students forging relationships with academics responsible for their first year learning experience and embedding themselves into academic life as soon as possible. '*It is pertinent that students' initial experience of university, especially experiences associated with teaching staff, teaching methods and assessment, be recognised as a significant factor in determining students' course persistence*' (Kantanis, 2002)

It was important that the Subject Groups (departments), which would play a more strategic role under the new School structure than they had done previously (coming on line in August 2003), had activities built into the induction programme for 2002 as a pilot for the new induction structure in 2003.

The centrepiece of the new induction programme, which would strengthen academic activities for new undergraduate students, would be the 9 Strand Approach. It would comprise compulsory strands providing a balance of social and academic introductions to the University, the School/Subject Group and their teaching. This timetable was going to require organisational change in many of the Schools. School staff were given a framework with the centrally organised strands already in place and asked to allocate the School strands to the remaining slots. Once completed, other university and Students'

Union social activities were planned around the 9 Strand timetable enabling a clash free and comprehensive induction programme to be achieved.

The 9 Strand Approach is made up of the following strands:

School Welcome

When: Monday (mainly pm)

This activity will take place on the Monday of Week 0 (Freshers' week). Schools were asked not to use the 'wine and nibbles' approach as it received poor ratings. They were asked to think of more imaginative formats such as the AFRAS quiz (new in 2001) which acted as an effective icebreaker for both new students and staff. The University Senior Management Group specified that Subject Group representatives should be present at their School Welcome.

University Registration

When: Monday or Tuesday

Fast tracking of new and returning students would be put in place enabling them to register in full before arrival. However, there would still be an in person registration opportunity for those unable to pre-register.

School Academic Orientation

When: Tuesday

Many Schools already included events in Week 0 where students were given basic orientation concerning School procedures and are given the University Handbook, the School/Course handbook and told how to use these; advice on choosing option courses and shown how the teaching timetable works. All Schools were asked to undertake this event in Week 0 instead of Week 1.

Study Skills and/or Mentoring Opportunities

When: Tuesday-Wednesday

It was considered that workshop-type provision would help introduce students to the distinctive features of University-level study. Subject differences do not prevent something useful being run at School level. It was recommended that mentoring by current 2nd and 3rd year students take place supported by academic expertise.

Vice Chancellor's Welcome and Introduction to University Services

When: Tuesday to Thursday

This event had been operating for a few years and already had an established format. However, in order to make it more effective, it was shortened from two hours to forty minutes.

Library Tour

When: Tuesday – Friday

This activity had been absent for a couple of years. The Library will give a talk and offer the opportunity for new students to attend tours.

ICT Introductory Sessions

When: Tuesday to Sunday

Minor modifications to the successful format from the previous year were made.

Subject Group Welcome and Introduction

When: Thursday or Friday

In 2002, new students would be required to meet most of the faculty in their 'home' subject, hear about their Subject Group's approach to the subject, be given a sketch of the coming 1st year, and a chance to ask questions of faculty and 2nd and 3rd year students. For some Subject Groups, this would mean bringing forward existing subject induction events that currently occurred in Week 1.

Personal Tutor Meetings

It was strongly recommend that an initial Personal Tutoring meeting (possibly group-based – just to make friendly contact) should take place towards the end of Week 0.

Other induction initiatives were redesigned and developed. These included the collation and reduction of information sent to new students, the introduction of University information helpdesks

manned by trained student helpers over arrival weekend (and the first two weeks of term) and the Students' Union and the Central Services working together to provide a clash free programme of social events. Links were made with external organisations such as Brighton and Hove Council who helped develop an easier Council Tax registration process in collaboration with Registry as well as advice on social activities for new students.

The Personal Tutoring Scheme at Sussex

The Autumn 2001 Review examined personal tutoring at Sussex; this existed in pockets around the University and adopted different formats. The aim was to ensure that each student had access to a personal tutor on a regular basis as part of their support network. Research has identified that students forging relationships with academics is crucial in engaging them in their academic work, in developing a sense of identity and shaping their attitude towards their degree. As Kantanis argues students need and '*seek affirmation from staff on their academic achievement*' because as McInnis states that '*first year students are naturally anxious about their personal performance in relation to other students, and in terms of the expectations of the academics*' (Kantanis, 2002).

Personal tutoring is just one arm of support that should be provided but academics providing pastoral care or taking responsibility for the personal development of students who can be '*reticent to initiate interaction, often because they find the power relation between academics and themselves overwhelming*' can help '*dispel the preconceptions held commonly by many students that university academics are impersonal, unapproachable, unavailable and inaccessible*' (Kantanis, 2002). '*The personal tutor system, if working well, offers a personal and dedicated relationship, which aims, through active listening, to be facilitative and supportive, referring the student onto other agencies where appropriate*' (Four Counties, 2002). The personal tutor role has been ratified by the Quality Assurance Agency.

For induction 2002, Schools which did not have a personal tutoring scheme in place were asked to introduce one. Those with a scheme were asked to examine it for effectiveness, focus and attendance levels. It was important to bring to the attention of academics the benefit of the personal tutoring role, the need for it to be effective and to balance the tension of student need versus other academic demands. Traditionally, many academics only became available in Week 1 when the term officially started and teaching commenced because induction was seen as an administrative function, rather than an academic one. The approach adopted was one of encouragement. Personal tutors were asked to hold personal tutoring meetings either on an individual or group basis at the end of Week 0 and by the start of Week 1 at the latest, and then regularly throughout the year.

Where absent schemes were introduced and many existing ones were redesigned, as in the School of Engineering and Information Technology where a weekly personal tutorial scheme had operated for many years. Tutors meet with tutees in groups of 5 or 6 weekly throughout the first year of undergraduate study but there was the feeling amongst academic faculty that it was not as effective as it could be, it seemed to lack focus and attendance sometimes poor. Understanding the need for an effective system and the drive to improve induction provided the impetus for change.

A more structured tutorial was developed which had been piloted in another School with some success. The focus was to be oral, presentational and writing skills. Activities included five and ten minute presentations which were delivered in the tutorial sessions for peer and faculty assessment. In addition briefing notes on topics for discussion each week were provided. This resulted in academics reporting improved student engagement in tutorials.

Conclusions

The Autumn 2002 Review reported very positive feedback on the new induction process and in particular, the 9 Strand Approach. Most students appeared to have met their personal tutor by the start

of Week 1. Building on this success, the PVC has developed a policy on personal tutoring with the Directors of Student Support in the new schools for implementation in 2003. Analysis to-date of permanent and temporary withdrawal rates for 2002/3 compared to 2001/2 have shown a significant improvement although the final attrition rates will not be known until September 2003.

References

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