

EXCITING TIMES: MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

It can be easy to forget the challenges that coming to university bring. Do new students receive the right sort of help and guidance to help them make the transition from school to university? One could ask if the chaos of induction (Freshers) week is an appropriate start to their time at university. In between bouts of serious socialising, new students are probably going to be expected to get enrolled, finalise module choices and sort out timetables and listen to someone telling them what a good choice they have made coming to his or her department.

The LEAP project (Lim 2002) suggests that 14 per cent of new students found the social transition to university life particularly challenging. Many attend university after 13 years of heavily-guided education, only to be left to swim in the university sea of knowledge, where information and guidance is increasingly left to web pages (the student portal), an indigestible student handbook or a hassled student support officer. To compound the problem, specific guidance from lecturers may be practically impossible because they are far too busy juggling their roles as teacher, researcher and (increasingly) administrator.

The run-up to university, the initial days at university and the following few weeks are especially important in terms of helping the student settle both academically and socially. It is important to ask just how well we manage this period. A few thoughts are presented here regarding the pre-, peri- and post-university periods.

Pre-induction: The key aim here should be to maintain the students excitement about coming to university and to make sure they know where to go for appropriate information.

- » do not over-sell courses on open days; be honest and realistic about the course and the university
- » make sure prospective students get the chance to talk with current students and, if possible, recent graduates about potential job prospects
- » keep in touch with students once they have accepted your offer
- » possibly recommend a key "whole degree" text to read before induction
- » be aware of the pressure that prospective students are under (exams, thinking about university, arranging finance and accommodation, leaving home for the first time)
- » make sure information being sent to students is not duplicated and is explicit if items need returning
- » avoid sending too much (irrelevant) information. More detailed information can be put on the website, or be made available by request
- » create a regular email list
- » Make sure students know their way about the campus. A campus based map reading exercise is a good starting point
- » Ensure that students know who their tutor is, how to find and contact him or her and what are the expectations from this relationship should be

Post-induction: The key aim should be to get off to a good start, make sure the students settle with confidence into university life and maintain their motivation.

Peri-induction: The key aim should be to ensure that the first week is a balanced blend of academic and social activities. This is a particularly important time to start to convey your academic expectations to the students. The students themselves will be starting to modify their expectations during this period

» make sure you know what is happening during the induction week and influence the "academic" activities if you can, particularly in terms of timing and what activities are undertaken

» make sure that students visit their "home" school or department early in the induction week to start to provide a "sense of place"

» liaise with your administrative offices to avoid last minute surprises in terms of additional unforeseen paperwork

» try and arrange sessions during the induction week where students team-build within their degree cohort

» some departments run short field courses at the end of induction week. These provide a way for students to meet others, to get to know the staff and to initiate the more formal learning process

» make sure whatever you do in this week is done well

» conduct regular small-group work, team work or tutorials with students to build confidence and enhance learning

» organise sessions in which students consider learning expectations, styles and outcomes

» provide opportunities to meet and work with Year 2, 3 and 4 cohorts

» conduct formative assessments early in the term so that students have some idea of progress

» provide quality feedback on early pieces of assessment to identify and rectify any weakness, and to promote confidence

» keep in regular touch with the new cohort and make time for regular feedback sessions

» be aware of the students who are not fitting in or are not happy in hall

» make sure students are aware of the wealth of guidance, both academic and personal, that is usually freely available within the university.

REFERENCE

Lim, H. (2002) *Learner experiences and achievement project (LEAP)*, survey report 2002, unpublished report of the Southampton Institute.

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