



Event Report  
**Transition Issues for  
Bioscientists/Scientists**

Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> March 2008  
University of East Anglia

Higher Education Institutions across the UK are developing and implementing a wide range of strategies designed to better serve the student experience in the biosciences. While the issues are not unique to the biosciences, there are many ways that institutions, departments, schools and individuals are assisting with student transition into and while in the university experience. Throughout the one day event a variety of different programmes, events, and other strategies that have been successfully used by different departments and/or institutions were highlighted. We were very pleased that Tony Cook, STAR Programme Leader from the University of Ulster, shared the experiences of the very successful Student Transition and Retention (STAR) Programme.



**“Really useful presentations and great review of lots of research in the area.”**

**“Excellent – well worth the travel time!”**

**“Renewed enthusiasm for finding out about previous learning experience”**

***Keynote: Dimensions of student transition***

Tony Cook, University of Ulster, STAR Programme Project Leader, started by raising the idea that we all know what good practice in transition is, once it has been pointed out to us. He shared his findings of the STAR project and raised a number of issues surrounding the retention of students, for example the differing reasons for student leaving higher education and the attributes of “at risk” students. He pointed out that overall retention of students is considered an institutional problem and the induction processes should start as soon as a student’s application is accepted. He shared a variety of ways to improve continuance focusing on its two components of early leaving and academic failure. Tony suggested that academics can directly impact student retention during the first 3 to 6 months of a new student’s experience in higher education. Throughout his talk he questioned some of the current practices in higher education and encouraged the need for additional dialogue leading to change.



## ***Institutional strategies for transition into and within university***

**Teaching mathematics and literacy to first year students**, Harriet Jones presented how the University of East Anglia has designed courses to help students with numeracy and literacy in her home School of Biological Sciences. Building students' confidence with regards to maths is paramount. Students who practised writing through science logs, practical write ups and assessment pieces were found to show huge improvements in student literacy ability. In addition teaching 'science writing' as a new subject removes students' defensiveness of their current writing ability.



**Supporting retention across an institution**, Eleanor Cohn, Principal Lecturer in Biology and Ecology, School of Applied Sciences, discussed various aspects of retention, including involving students in the whole University of Wolverhampton experience. She spoke about the work of Enabling Achievement within a Diverse Student Body CETL (Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning) based at Wolverhampton which has used a number of initiatives to increase retention, including developing new social learning spaces, using e-portfolios for support and reflection, personal development planning and support for disabled students, including specialised IT support enabling access. She also asked, 'Why is it that we focus on why students don't achieve?' bringing up an important point of looking at successful students to better understand why they do well and to see if those lessons can be implemented elsewhere.



### ***Workshop: What do students know as they enter university? Investigating students' previous learning experiences (PLE)***

Janette Myers, St George's, University of London, led the group in an engaging workshop designed to address ways to better understand the student's previous learning experiences. Each participant brainstormed their own knowledge of students' previous learning experiences as well as what they would like to know more about. Small groups were then formed in order to determine ways lecturers could design projects targeted to develop a better understanding of previous learning experiences.



## ***Departmental strategies promoting transition/retention***

**The role of residential courses in Year 1 induction**, Mark Langan, Department of Environmental & Geographical Sciences, gave details of the residential course at Manchester Metropolitan University and the advantages behind running such a course for the learners including socialisation, inspiration, exploration and communication. He highlighted the importance of preparing students before the course, including a 'fun' learning task and providing students with early feedback. Anecdotal evidence supports implementation of such a course to help increase student retention rates.



### **PASS: An example of integrated student support within an academic school**

Sue Robbins, Oxford Brookes University highlighted the PASS programme at Oxford Brookes. She believes personal tutors are key in aiding transition and retention of students. The PASS programme also implemented resit support and other interventions for students with poor performance were put in place. These measures had several benefits including increased student morale, increased retention rates and an improved performance in later assessments.



### ***Swapshops: Experiences of assisting with transition and retention in the biosciences/sciences***

**Second year induction and transition**, Kay Yeoman and Helen Webster, University of East Anglia, shared an institutional support group, The Learning Enhancement team, aimed to assist students at the student services level through workshops, tutorials (generic/subject specific), resources, and drop-in sessions).

**Experiences of transition from school to UEA**, University of East Anglia students, Samantha Vogt, Rebecca Kitchen, and Ellen Taylor, all shared their experiences as entering first year students while exiting the world of school. The information and suggestions provided by the students were very well received by the audience. Interestingly, despite coming from three different school backgrounds, each held similar viewpoints about ways to help the transitional process into higher education.



### ***Reflections on the day and close***

Anne Vallins, Transition Project Officer, University of East Anglia, gave her thoughts on what she had learnt on the day; and Eddie Gulc, Higher Education Academy, highlighted some additional resources available to aid delegates work in transition.