

What Works? Student Retention & Success



Supporting student success: strategies for institutional change

St Mary's University
April 2017

By Jane Chambers

What Works? Student Retention & Success is a Paul Hamlyn Foundation initiative working with the Higher Education Academy, Action on Access and 13 UK universities. The second phase (What Works?2) builds on the first phase of the initiative (What Works?1). What Works?1 culminated in the report: Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change (Thomas 2012).

Description of the institution and its disciplines to provide contextual overview

St Mary's University is a Catholic Higher Education Institution founded in 1850. It was founded by the Catholic Poor Schools Committee to train teachers to work in the many voluntary Catholic schools which opened across the country, especially following the movement of population caused by the Irish Famine.

Today St. Mary's is a university which has grown considerably from those early days yet it remains faithful to that founding ethos through its continuing commitment to education, strong links to many of the Catholic secondary and primary schools across the country, and a strong commitment to social justice. This is reflected in the University being an inclusive environment, welcoming students and staff of all faiths and none. It is committed to a holistic approach to education, which forms the person in the widest possible sense. St Mary's is part of many national and international networks of universities. It has strong regional and national connections built up over many decades. It is now focusing on its international links and recently opened an office in the United States. The international links are helping to drive innovation at St. Mary's and the exchange of best practice across the University, from marketing to innovative curriculum development.

The institution has been through a period of change during the lifetime of this project; in January 2014 St Mary's was granted University title. Preceding that and in September 2013, the university implemented a curriculum restructure for undergraduate programmes with a move from a 15 credit to a 20 credit structure. This new structure has been being rolled out on a year-on-year basis. The change of credit structure has impacted on all aspects of the student (and academic staff) experience and has meant that year on year comparisons have been difficult to assign to any one intervention.

The external national context has also seen considerable change during this period with the increase in fees and the removal of the numbers cap.

Internal changes to staffing and the organisation of the Academic Affairs department have necessitated changes to the core team during the lifetime of the project. Those involved across the 2 years are shown in table 1 below.

Three disciplines participated in the programme – Sport Science, Business Management (previously Management Studies) and Drama. All disciplines chose to focus on Induction. Discipline team members and their programmes are shown in table 2 below.

Table 1: Core Team Members

2013/14	
Institutional senior manager	Dr Claire Taylor
Team leader / project manager	Professor Lesley Haig
Data expert	Stephen Scott
Academic member of staff	Chris Hull
Student / student representative	Pietro Palladino
2014/15	
Institutional senior manager	Dr Claire Taylor
Team leader / project manager	Dr Claire Taylor
Data expert	Bettina Baumann
Academic member of staff	Chris Hull
Student / student representative	Alexander Lavall
Additional Core Team Member	Liz Coombs & Jane Chambers

Table 2: Discipline Team

Discipline/subject area	Sport Science	Drama	Management
Programme name	BSc Sport Science – Single and Combined Honours routes	BA Drama, BA Drama and Theatre Arts, BA Drama and Applied Theatre, BA Drama and Physical Theatre – Single and Combined Honours routes	BA Management Studies (BA Business Management from 14/15) – Single and Combined Honours routes
Full or part-time	Full	Full	Full
Expected cohort size (2013/14)	200	90	70
Discipline team Leader Email	Gill McInnes	Patsy Burn	Lise Georgeson
Team member name Email	Mike Drayson	Mark Griffin	Tony Davies

Impact data

Whilst it is challenging to draw definitive conclusions on the impact of the What Works? project due to the number of variables concerned with engagement, retention and success, the following findings draw upon the data generated from the baseline Level 4 entrants 2013/14 and 2014/15. The findings will address the impact of the a) engagement, belonging and self-confidence survey data (Survey data) and b) progression data. The findings consider comparisons of the University with the sector, and between the sector and the subject-disciplines.

a) **Survey data: 2013/14, Level 4 entrants**

Looking at the baseline data (2013/14, Level 4 entrants, Autumn 2013 survey), St Mary's equalled the sector mean in engagement and belonging. However students scored slightly higher to the sector mean in self-confidence. This pattern was repeated in the Spring 2015 survey with St Mary's scores remaining higher than the sector mean.

Comparing St Mary's mean score values overtime, that is the baseline cohort survey, Autumn 2013 and Spring 2015, the data indicates that there is little variation in the mean scores for belonging and self-confidence. However the mean score for engagement in Spring 2015 was slightly higher than compared to Autumn 2013.

It would appear therefore, on the basis of the mean scores the impact of the What Works? Interventions have had a mostly positive impact on students' reporting of self-confidence, engagement and belonging. In particular notable improvements in engagement were observed with students in Drama and in self-confidence with students in Management Studies.

Student demographics indicates that at St Mary's reported self-confidence is slightly higher amongst mature students (20 years +) (4 compared to 3.63 for under 20 years), and who are men (3.73 vs 3.60 for women). Levels of reported engagement mirror the mean cores for self-confidence, but by way of contrast, mature women reported higher mean score for belongingness than men (4.25 vs 3.88)

b) **Survey data: 2014/15, Level 4 entrants**

With reference to the Level 4 students who started in academic session 2014/15, when comparing St Mary's mean score values in Autumn 2014 with Spring 2016, the data indicates little variation in the overall mean engagement scores (3.95 vs 3.85). The mean self-confidence score saw a slight decrease as students reported in Level 5 at 3.58 compared to 3.69 at Level 4. Mean belongingness scores dropped from 4.21 in Level 4 to 3.87 in Level 5.

Whilst there was a decrease in the University's mean scores for belongingness and self-confidence, this pattern was also observed at sector level. However, engagement both at sector and University level remained relatively constant.

Looking more closely at the University subject cohorts, the mean self-confidence scores, at Levels 4 & 5, across all three subjects were higher than the sector mean scores. With regards to belongingness at Level 5, both Drama and Management Studies had a slightly lower mean score than the sector. With engagement at Level 5, Drama had a higher mean score (4.09) compared to the sector average (3.85), whereas Management Studies (3.85) and Sports Science (3.74) either equalled or were slightly lower than the sector average. This pattern was seen previously with the Level 4 Autumn 2014 survey data.

c) Progression data

Based on the available success data¹ (2013/14 Level 4 entrants and 2014/15 Level 4 entrants), 6% more of the 2014/15 Sports Science entrants were successful as compared to the previous Level 4 year of entrants. There was no reported difference in the percentage of successful students in the Drama programme. In Management Studies 3% fewer of the students from the 2014/15 entrants were successful as compared to those in 2013/14.

With reference to the cohort mean marks, the mean mark for the 2014/15 Level 4 Sports Science cohort was higher by 5.3 points than the 2013/14 cohort (56.1 vs 50.8). In the same period, the mean mark for Drama was 1.2 points higher (61.9 vs 60.7). However, for Management Studies the mean mark for the 2014/15 Level 4 students was 2.3 points lower than the 2013/14 entrants (43.8 vs 46.1).

Whilst there do not appear to have been any significant changes as a result of the What Work? Interventions, it should be noted that at programme-level, Drama has seen an overall positive impact on students success. Furthermore there has been an improvement in the reported self-confidence of students reported self-confidence across each of the What Work? programmes.

Planning for and implementing change

Each of the disciplines selected came from a different School of the University. The teams were self-selecting, and with that the three disciplines represented a range of practices and concerns. Each began the project with very different induction and pre-entry processes and equally student number and size of Programme team.

All discipline teams chose to implement a pre-entry website. 'Are You Ready?' discipline websites were designed by each programme team to help introduce new students to studying at St Mary's. The teams also looked to develop longer term induction activities and to explore more targeted contact with individual students in the early stages. The intention was to help students to engage early with the institution and their programmes, creating a sense of belonging by identifying the triggers for engagement and ensuring greater reach through ongoing induction activities.

The discipline leads and team members were all members of the Student Retention, Engagement and Success Strategy Implementation Group which received their regular updates, and all also participated in the What Works? national events. They were supported additionally by staff members in the Marketing and Recruitment, and Learning Technology teams.

Evaluation strategy

Focus group interviews, questionnaires and student data on pre-induction website hits were used selectively by each subject-based project to measure the impact of the What Works? interventions. The Drama and Management programmes made use of focus group interviews and questionnaires post intervention with students in their first year of study; Sports Science drew upon evidence from questionnaires post-intervention and Drama additionally made use of web-site hits from pre-registration students. Each Programme implemented its own set of evaluation strategies and these mostly qualitative findings, were used to evaluate the What Works? Project at Institutional level together with the Mantz Yorke survey data.

¹ Defined by Mantz Yorke as 96+ credits at the level

Changes implemented at the discipline level and impact

St Mary's University has developed a Student Retention, Engagement and Success Strategy (SERS). An implementation group was set up to develop an Action Plan and drive through this strategy. The group consisted of members of the What Works? core and discipline teams (see tables 1 and 2 above) as well as representatives from across the University concerned with student retention and engagement including those from Teaching and Learning, International, Registry, Widening Participation, and Library and Learning Technology.

Following completion of the project, the SERS strategy will be reviewed. The Implementation Group will be replaced by a SERS working group, chaired by the Director of Teaching and Learning, and reporting to the Teaching and Learning Committee.

The SERS Action Plan in 2013-2015 included actions in relation to:

- enhanced information and support for students at points of transition including improved induction
- further development and support of the Students as Partners initiative and support for SMSU strategic vision
- raising staff awareness of student engagement, support and guidance for staff and enhanced reward and recognition of staff
- embedding of engagement within the curriculum and celebrating student engagement
- accurate and timely provision of data with improved systems for managing students at risk of leaving, measurements of student belonging and engagement and consistent module level evaluations.

In light of the What Works Project, the following changes have been implemented across the University:

- Dedicated Induction Week for Level 4 students started in September 2015 and continuing into 2016 focusing on students' perceptions of belonging to St Mary's
- Programmes within each of the Project Schools have adopted the managing expectations approach to pre-entry website and paper copy information sent to students prior to registration
- Academic induction to being a Higher Education extended to a year- long programme of timetabled activity and programme-level embedded delivery
- A new Teaching Learning and Development Framework offering accredited routes to HEA Fellowship and opportunities for colleagues to develop and enhance their practice in teaching, learning and assessment through participation in workshops, seminars, critical forums, lectures and conferences at St Mary's.
- UK Student Engagement Survey – piloted across all four Schools in 2014/15 and rolled out to all programmes in academic session 2015/16

- Student as Partners – opportunities for the Student Union General Manager to promote and explain the Student as Partners initiative for instance at the T&L Planning Day 2014 and through a series of PD/AD talks.
- Development of a Student Engagement Plan serving to further develop student involvement in learning and teaching, quality and enhancement
- Systematic use of a University-wide module evaluation system with a move to formulating a central surveys unit
- Dedicated resources identified to employ a student Engagement Officer working collaboratively between the University and Student Union

Sustainability

The key learning from the What Works? Project is centred on how programmes develop and respond to their students' preferred ways of learning and thereby engagement with their subject disciplines. It would seem to be ever-more evidential, and as a result of being involved in the What Works? Project, that students identify most closely with their chosen disciplines rather than identifying themselves as being a university student. With that comes pedagogical signifiers or learning practices bespoke to the subject, and these are all important when it comes to managing student expectations about the opportunities and challenges that their programmes of study will place upon them as they embark on their degree programmes. Furthermore managing expectations extends to the students' support network, be it family and or friends, in enabling them to begin to appreciate some of the demands the students will experience and enjoy managing as a subject at St Mary's University. Learning from this Project has therefore reinforced the need for the University's programmes to provide easily accessible and meaningful information to all students in order to manage expectations about what it is to be part of a successful undergraduate experience.

The good practice in managing student expectations and developing a sense of belonging to St Mary's are being rolled out across programme teams. Furthermore, enhanced Data Management Systems are being routinely used to provide pre-emptive support, guidance and recommendation for student retention and achievement.

To support the on-going work of the Student Engagement, Retention and Success Implementation Group, the following practices are being developed and rolled out:

- Development of a 'peer mentoring' pilot in the Business Management programme for 2015/16 entrants. Results from the pilot will be disseminated during semester 2016/17
- Engagement with students from minority ethnic groups to identify perceptions of the student learning journey and what could work even better

Conclusions

Whilst all Programmes have reported on the benefits from participating and what each will continue to implement and advance, tentative conclusions are proposed for scaled up change in practice. This is mostly concerned with Programmes working in often time-poor circumstances and with hard-

pressed institutional services. Programmes largely worked independently of one another; however, there was opportunity over the course of the Project to share and present practice, process and indicative outcomes. The highest levels of commitment to project success thereby enabled innovation in pre-entry and induction practice to have been captured, disseminated and influenced practice across the university .

Making resources and releasing time for colleagues to innovate and develop ways of working to enhance retention and student success is essential is for the sustainable generation of new ways of working. For a University to gain a thorough understanding and appreciation of the impact that important engagement and retention activities can have on a student's sense of belonging requires time for project management and initiative roll-out. Moreover to set in motion practices that require information systems to work in different ways to that of the norm there is a requirement for additional time from professional services and commitment of financial resources. These points however have been addressed by the formation of a Strategy for Student Engagement, Retention and Success and Implementation Group. The Strategy's central purpose is to focus on bettering the experience of the student across the lifespan of their programme of study. In doing so academic and professional services are provided with a directive for ensuring that all students have a knowledge of what will be required of them as a learner and the means by which they can readily access up to date information about who will be leading their programmes of study and how they will be learning with their peer group.

Ensuring that there is sustainable resource for the design of tailored discipline-level online information platforms that target pre-entry and induction phases of the students' learning journey is essential. Attendant funding streams are necessary for developmental work and maintaining an agile position for responding to programme needs. Therein lays the importance of the Strategy for retention and success; it provides a framework for enhancing the learning experience of being a student at St Mary's.

In taking forward the recommendations from the Project which are concerned with Programmes offering discipline specific and tailored pre-entry and induction activities, including online information platforms, issues be addressed include:

- the extent to which management information systems are sufficiently agile to provide readily available live data
- when it is appropriate to replace existing good induction practice with a new and untested initiative
- the extent to which there is institutional capacity to provide readily available technological advice and expertise in web-site design
- the workload issues of managing Project activities and sharing of good practice with academic staff's commitments to teaching and research
- endeavouring to evidence robust causation between innovation activity and student retention

Appendix

Case Study: ‘Are You Ready?’ Evaluating the Business Management’s pre-induction web link: what did the students think?

Dr Tony Davies, Discipline Lead: Business Management*, St Mary’s University, Twickenham

Rationale

The Business Management (BM) programme has been running for 14 years and includes seven members of staff, including the Programme Director within the school of Management and Social Sciences (MSS). In the academic year 2014/15 the BM’s level 4 cohort consisted of 74 single and joint honours students taken from a combination of 39 possible degree programmes. Over a quarter (30/134) of the BM students were drawn from a single honours programme including Business Law (21/30) and Sport Science (10/30).

Demographic data for the academic year 2014/15 for the full cohort (74) reveal that the majority of the students on the BM programme were from an ethnic minority background (58%), and a high proportion from wider participation including A/AS level entry (36/74) and/or classified by the University as from a Low Socioeconomic background (15/74)⁽¹⁾. Current data for the academic year 2015/2016 level 4 cohort includes 132 students on the BM programme, of which 56 single honours. No further demographic information is available at the time of this report⁽¹⁾.

The progression rates for the BM programme are below both the HE sector norms and the SMU average, with the single honours and joint honours students having a five year mean of 83% (up to 2014/15)⁽²⁾.

However, taking into account the impact of student demographics on progression rates (Archer *et al.*, 2003; Reay *et al.*, 2009; HEA, 2012) along with the weak vocational nature of management subjects (Coffield, *et al.*, 2008) these figures could be viewed in a more positive light and need comparison with other similar demographic groups in the HE sector.

Nevertheless it was decided that the Business Management programme would benefit from participating in the What works? Student retention and success change programme (Phase 2), as the intervention would focus on student engagement and participation through the re-development of the programme’s induction and pre-induction activities.

*Since the start of the What Works? Project the title of this programme has changed from Management Studies to Business Management.

As part of the ‘What works?’ project the BM students were surveyed in each of their three years of study at St Mary’s. The survey produced three numerical indicators (Belongingness, Engagement and Self-confidence) which were intended for comparable purposes only. As there are issues over causality, reliability and validity it was decided not to draw upon this data but to produce our own data based upon the specific intervention.

Rafts of new induction initiatives were introduced by the Programme team during the academic years 2013/14 and 2014/15, which effectively lead to the re-construction of the student induction process. The source for these initiatives was a combination of the teaching teams’ new ideas, existing initiatives and, largely, drawing upon the findings from Phase 1 of the project (HEA, 2012 and Thomas, 2012). This process was spread over a six week period and involved staging of critical interventions, an orientation exercise, a student-led ‘ice breaker’ session, interactive quizzes, one-to-one assessment feedback sessions, an enhanced personal academic tutor system and a pre-induction web-link. The two principal aims of this pre-induction activity were to demonstrate the inclusiveness of St Mary’s, with its strong traditions of pastoral care and academic support, and to articulate a set of ‘higher education expectations’ for our prospective students.

Description/discussion of the intervention

The pre-induction web link “Are You Ready” was initially piloted prior to the start of the academic year 2014/15 changes were then made, based on student feedback, to form an updated version for the academic year 2015/16 – which has been evaluated.

Prospective Business Management students were provided with a link to the website by Student Recruitment. The site encompassed four themes: Welcome, Induction, Meet the Team and Reading, with each section containing key information on these themes. The site included student videos (talking heads) to present their perspective on the themes, welcoming new students, and importantly to present information in a manner demonstrating the inclusiveness and friendly nature of the university, as well as an outline of the academic demands of the BM programme.

St Mary’s introduced three pre-induction pilots during the academic years 2014/15 and 2015/16, including Business Management, Drama and Sports Science. The University’s aim was to evaluate the effect of the pre-induction pilots in terms of improved engagement and if successful to roll out similar induction sites with other programmes⁽³⁾. Therefore, it was

decided to review the Business Management initiative from the customers’ (i.e. students) perspective on their levels of engagement, combined with a view to assessing other ‘value-added’ elements and areas for further development.

Method

A mixed method combining quantitative and qualitative approaches was taken to assess the effectiveness of the pre-induction web-site with the BM students, which would include the opportunity for feedback to improve and develop the site, in terms of refinement and further opportunities to build on student engagement.

The principal research instrument was a questionnaire incorporating both closed and some open ended questions for level 4 students to complete. The questionnaire covered four themes: the effectiveness of the communication link, general impressions of the content, evaluation of the site on five key indicators, and a short development ‘what would you like to see next’ section. Note: the final section on development did not yield any new information or ideas and is not included in the report.

The approach to analysing the data was to break it into conceptual components around the four question themes through an open coding method, then employing an axial coding approach (Forrester, 2010). The same questionnaire was provided to both cohorts as there was no discernible difference in the concept of their opinions and thus the findings of both sets were merged, with the exception of the quantifiable data.

Evidence of the impact

The questionnaire was given to level 4 students to complete during the academic years 2014/15 and 2015/16, with response rates of 35% and 54% accordingly ⁽⁴⁾. There are no identifiable reasons for the difference in response rates between the academic years, other than a naturally occurring variation in survey completion rates. The detailed findings are broken out into the main survey themes.

Part A: “Before you started (the BM programme) did you receive information on the website?”

The aim of the initial section was ascertain the extent to which students were aware of and had engaged with the BM web-link prior to their enrolment. The results were disappointing with just 11% (3/26) of students from academic year 2014/15 and 27% (18/66) from the academic year 2015/16 cohorts having received information on the link; a similar proportion of students were identified as having elected to ‘log-on’ to the web-site.

Reasons for the low level of initial access to the link were identified from students’ comments in section B2 (Drawbacks) including: some students were never sent the link “*I did not receive before I started the course*”; late applicants were omitted from the process “*Not sent to all students*”; or an ‘overload’ of pre-entry information meant the students simply missed the email “*Sent out to students amidst the spam – sort it out*”.

Part B: General Impression

This section of the questionnaire included a ‘qualitative’ feedback designed to provide responses concerning initial impressions, advantages and drawbacks of the site, ease of navigation, relevance of information provided, value of student video clips, and ideas on other types of information that the site could provide to new students. There was no discernible difference between the responses from both year cohorts therefore the data are combined in this report.

Initial Impressions

The 'Initial Impression' of the site was very positive for the majority of students, with 95% in academic year 2014/15 (22/23) and 83% (51/62) in academic year 2015/16 providing a supportive set of responses. Examples include: *'useful website'*; *'provides all the right information'*; *'helpful'*; *'welcoming, useful good idea'*; *'good idea before joining uni'*; *'nice introduction to the course'*.

There were very few negative responses, with comments such as *'boring'*; *'Doesn't interest me as it is very dull and boring'* rarely included (5/62 in 2015/16 and 0/23 in 2014/15). There were six ambiguous remarks which proved difficult to classify, containing wording such as *'it's about website of management staff'*, which were excluded in the analysis.

In assessing the benefits and drawbacks of the website the majority of the responses emphasised the positive aspects of the intervention.

Taking the responses on the Perceived Benefits (fig.1) it was decided to apply a four stage taxonomy involving the Information Provided; Lecturer Information; Emphasis on Personal Support and Other to achieve the most relevant analysis and insight.

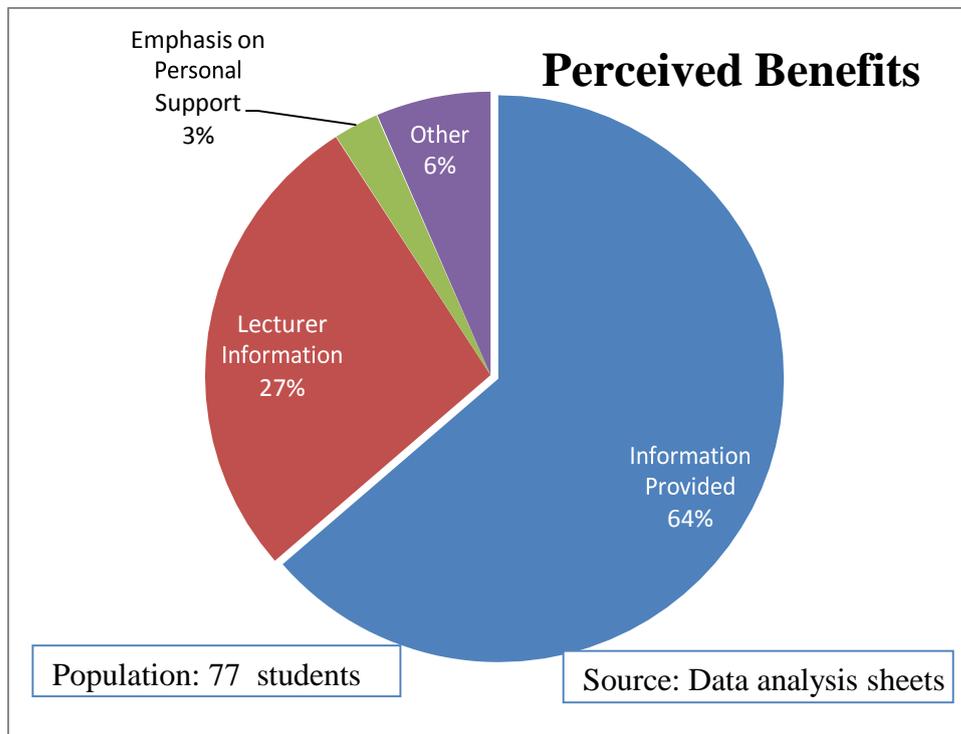
Information Provided

The majority of the responses (64% of the students) identified the provision of information as the main positive aspect of the BM website, which supported the idea that this was the main driver for the intervention. In this category the comments were largely monosyllabic and limited in nature, e.g.: *'received useful information'*; *'information'*; *'easy layout'*, *'information provided'*. However, there were more in-depth replies provided from their qualitative responses (later) which helped the analysis by supplying more specific examples, such as: *'Information about the course, the lecturers you will be familiar with, preparation for the first day'*; *'The information is well written and can give the new students, clear understanding of what to expect at the university'*

Lecturer information

This second category involved the 'Meet the Team' section on the web-link, which aimed to provide brief details about the teaching team, including photos, contact details and the subjects they taught. The students identified the 'value-added' elements from this part of the site as providing faces to names of teaching staff, basic details on tutors and subject information. Students provided more detailed comments and focused on familiarity with staff and access: *'Get to see what lecturers look like, get impressions of the university'*; *'pictures to put names to lecturers' faces'*; *'Get to know staff and email questions'*; *'photos of staff so that we know who to speak to when we first arrive, recommendations on books to read, to get an idea before the first lecture'*.

Figure 1: What do you consider are the advantages of the website?



Emphasis on Personal Support

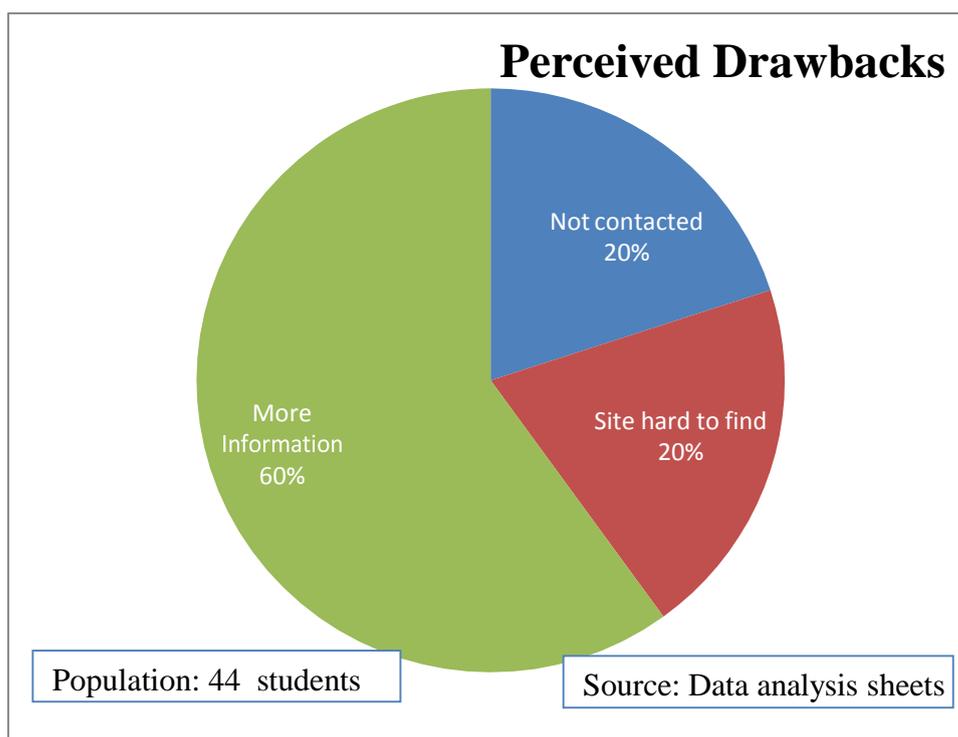
One aspect of the web-site intervention was to create an awareness of the student support mechanism available on the Business Management programme; this was to be achieved mainly through the use of student video clips (talking heads). This section of the survey received the smallest level of response and included comments such as ‘*You are shown who is there to support (you) on your course*’: This is dealt with in further detail later on in the analysis when the impact of the video clips is discussed.

Other

A minor section within the questionnaire to collect additional comments, some of which were difficult to place in context and tended to consist of single words such as: ‘*great*’; ‘*tidy*’, thus were not very helpful in terms of an evaluation tool and are excluded from the main analysis.

The Perceived Drawbacks (fig.:2) was categorised into three themes which involved: ‘More Information’; ‘Not contacted’ and ‘Site hard to find’.

Figure 2. What do you consider are the drawbacks of the website?



‘More Information’

‘More information’ was the general recurrent theme within this section, and throughout the analysis, in particularly details revolving around the Programme Structure, Assessment protocols and the wider University context (one stop shop approach for information) were highlighted. Typical comments included: *‘More course information, what to expect section’*; *‘too basic, could include more information’*; *‘Could give more infor. about the uni. as well as the course’*; *‘Lacks information on uni., dates, events, calendar, societies/clubs related to the course’*.

Note: Students were asked to provide suggestions for future content later in the analysis.

Not contacted

This was a direct question included earlier in the questionnaire, but some students commented later in the survey, reflecting that a significant number of people were not contacted or failed to receive adequate information regarding the pre-induction web site and the link.

Site hard to find

This was discussed previously in relation to the first question on ‘did you receive information?’

Ease of navigation

Students were provided with the web link address and asked to rate ease of access (fig.: 3), with connection to the site reported as being fairly easy and straightforward.

Figure 3: How easy is it to find the Business Management Link?

Classification	Actual Number	%
Very easy	50	59
Somewhat easy	31	37
Not easy	3	4
Number of students: 84		

The students were asked to provide suggestions and ideas on how the BM induction web could be enhanced and sufficiently stand out from other sites on St Mary's main website. There were 51 responses, with the majority identifying the need to create a clearer linkage to the BM web site, placing the link into students' 'My Modules' area, or potentially a separate Business Programme web site with its own App.

Relevance of information

Students were asked to rate the relevance of the information available on the site (fig.4) and to provide additional comments on what else should be included (fig.5).

Figure 4: Does the Business management site include the type(s) of information you were looking for?

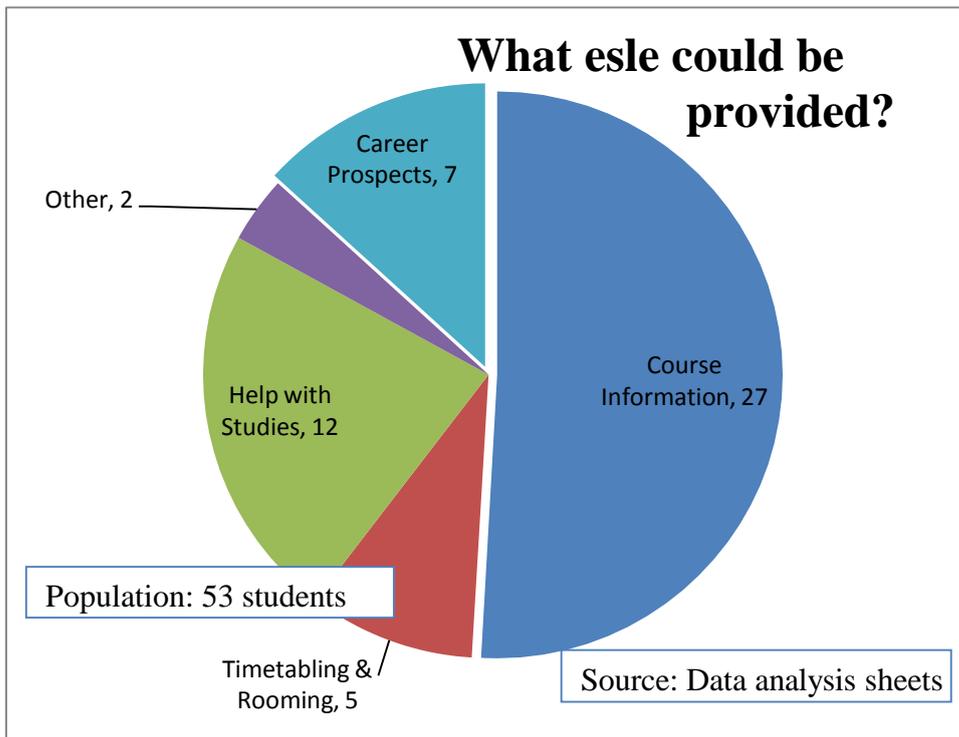
Classification	Actual Number	%
Yes	58	68
No	4	5
Not sure	23	27
Number of students: 85		

Five categories were constructed from the data from this question, including: Course Information; Career Prospects, Timetabling and Rooming; Help with Studies; and Other (fig.:5).

Course Information

The students want to see more information available on module content and option choices during levels 5 and 6 and, in one case, details on pathway routes. Additional information wanted included reading lists and recommended text book purchases – information already available on the site, but not identified by the students who asked for this (future opportunity to explore how and where information is accessed to assist easier identification for students).

Figure 5: What other information do you want to see that is currently not included in the Business Management site



Career Prospects

This area involved touching upon employment opportunities and their expectations for when they graduate, which has the potential for BM to include information involving career opportunity statistics plus testimonials from ex-students.

Timetabling and rooming

This chiefly involved the provision of advance information for Semester two, plus travel advice (to/from SMU, local amenities, etc).

Help with studies

Students identified further information to be provided on course work, which included exemplars on feedback, assignment structure, top tips from lectures and marked sample essays/ written feedback. This would also include dates and information on course workshops, availability of ‘drop-in’ sessions and learning support activities.

Other

There were very few miscellaneous comments which mainly involved information on social events and ‘student testimonials’.

Value of the student video clips

Students were expected to view the video clips as part of their assessment of the website and asked simply to state 'Yes' or 'No' if they had viewed the clips (fig. 6). Those students who replied 'Yes' were asked to comment on the video clips, whilst those that replied 'No' were asked for a reason why they had not viewed it.

Figure 6: Did you view the video clips (talking heads)?

Answer	Actual Number	%
Yes	63	84
No	12	16
Number of students: 75		

Comments on the video Clip (talking heads)

From the 63 'Yes' respondents and the 43 who provided comments four themes/classifications were produced (fig.7): Good; Helpful; Quality Issue and Other.

Good

Here the students provided general comments of 'approval' with little insightful

analysis. Typical comments included: 'good'; 'OK'; 'decent and informative' and 'good insight'. There was little analysis to be drawn from these responses, except the implied general level of approval.

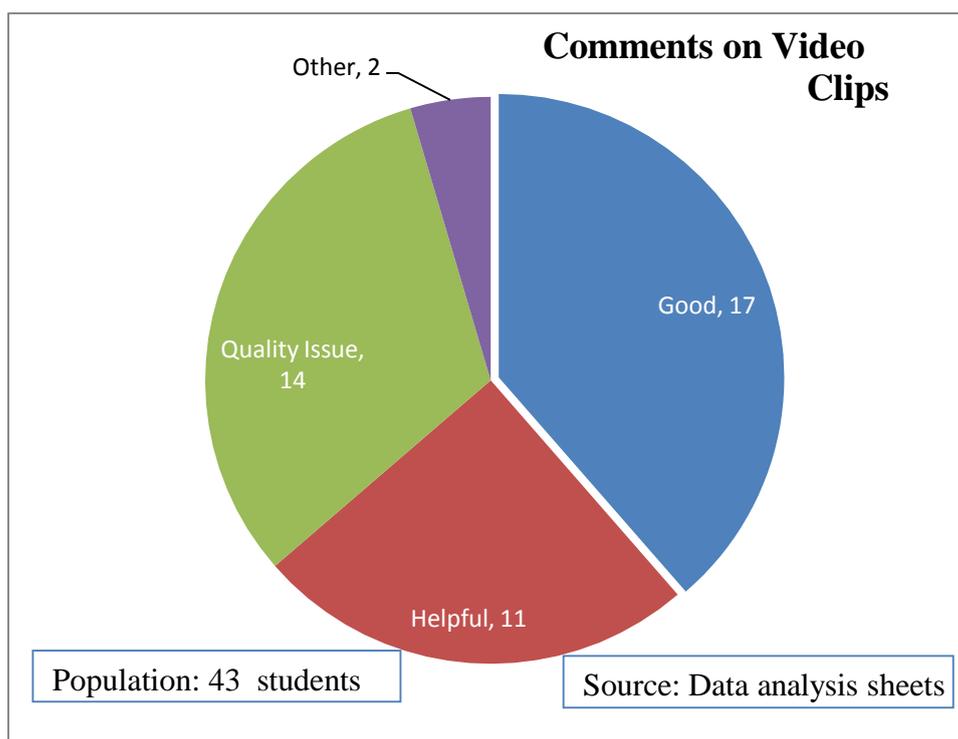
Helpful

These comments were more qualified as students tended to provide a fuller account or opinion of the video clips: *'I thought the video clips gave a useful insight into how to handle uni. Life as well as what to look for on the course'; 'helpful to hear from from other students'*.

Quality Issues

Students focussed on two main issues, being the content and the quality of the video material.

Figure 7: Please comment on your views of the use of video clips



Content involved opinions on the level and depth of the information provided by the actors, and consisted of comments such as *'too short'*; *'more information on the course'*; *'too brief, needed more information'*. Whereas comments on the quality of the video presentation focussed more on techniques, background, speech and presentation skills; *'not really professional'*; *'add some excitement and realism'*.

Other

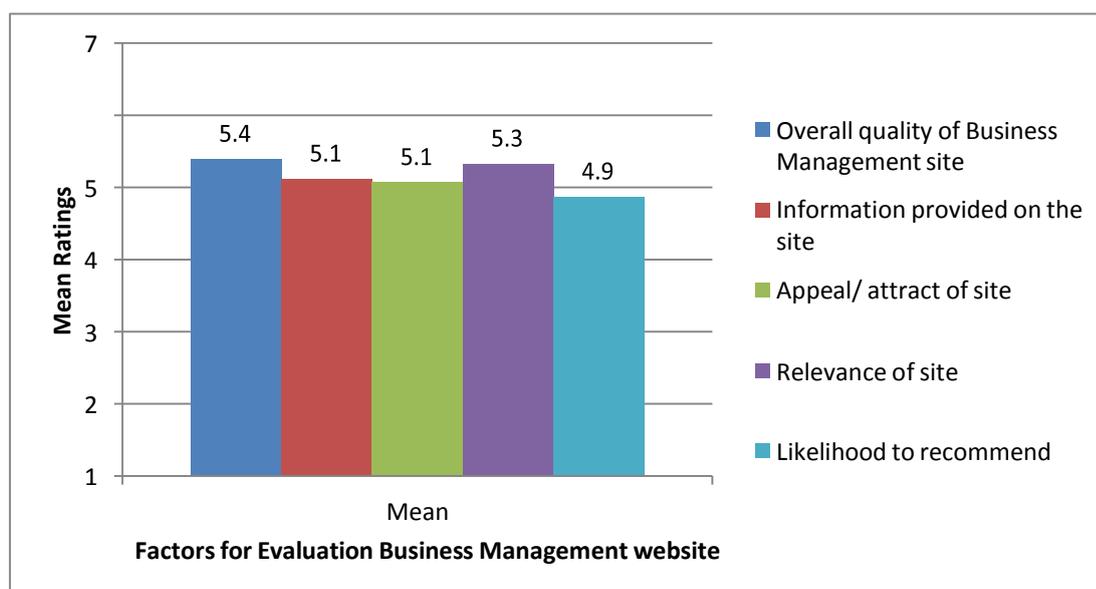
This contained miscellaneous comments which were difficult to contextualise, for instance: *'good for lazy people who may not want to read'*.

No insight was provided from the 12 students who chose not to access the video clips as comments were very general and consisted of: *'I am not one for watching videos'*; *'didn't want to'*.

Part C – Evaluation of the website pages

Respondents were asked to rate the quality of the BM web site employing a Likert rating scale of 1 to 7, where 1 equals 'very low' and 7 equals 'very high') against five indicators (fig.8). The data were obtained only for the academic year 2015/16 cohort survey (63 responses), as the response rates in the first survey were too low to claim statistic relevance (8 responses).

Figure: 8 Mean rating evaluation of the website



Population 63 students 2015/16

Overall, students positively rated the five indicators with mean ratings around 5 (4.9 to 5.4). There remains scope for improvement in each of the indicator areas to increase future ratings to 6 or 7. Moreover, there is little differentiation between the five indicators although 'likelihood to recommend' the BM website had the lowest mean rating of 4.9. Improvements on the other indicator areas, such as improving overall quality, making it more appealing and relevant to new students should have a positive influence on 'recommendation'. The rationale to improve the rating for 'recommendation' is that students effectively endorse the BM site to their peers, increase the volume of students visiting the site and potentially provide a proxy for good student 'engagement' at the pre-induction phase of student life at SMU.

Lessons Learnt and Sustainability

From the student perspective the introduction of a pre-induction web link has proved to be a valuable tool as, on the whole, the intervention has produced a positive impact on students' perception of the BM course and the University. However, improvements are recommended to ensure communications on the availability of the link are sent to students in a timely and clear manner. More relevant course content can be uploaded onto the site and the videos presented in a more 'professional manner' with emphasis on the BM programme's student support qualities.

Based upon the student's experience of this pilot there is scope for a pre-induction web-link to roll out across the University, either on a programme or School level and the evidence from the case study should be disseminated accordingly. Future evaluations should benchmark against the 'Evaluation of the website pages' exercise (Part C) with the aim of achieving mean average scores of around 6.

References:

- Archer, L., Hutchings, H. and Ross, A. (2003). *Higher Education and Social Class Issues of exclusion and inclusion*. Continuum.
- Coffield, F., Edward, S., Finlay, I., Hodgson, A., Spours, K. and Steer, T. (2008). *Improving Learning, Skills and Inclusion*. London: Routledge.
- Davies, A. (2014). *Practitioner perspectives on a franchise FHE relationship: has the policy process produced a new model of HE or just more FE?* Scholarly Press.
- Forrester, M. A. (2010). *Doing Qualitative Research in Psychology. A Practical Guide*. London: Sage
- Higher Education Academy (HEA) (2012). *Compendium of effective practice in higher education retention and success*. Aston University, Birmingham and HEA, York. March 2012.
- Reay, D., Crozier, G. and Clayton, J. (2009). 'Fitting in' or standing out': working-class students in UK higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, iFirst Article, pp1- 18.
- Scot, P. (2009). On the Margins or Moving into the Mainstream? Higher Education in Further Education in England. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 63(4), pp. 402-418.
- Thomas, L. (2012). *Building student engagement and belonging in higher Education at a time of change: final report from the What Works? Student Retention and Success programme*, HEA. York

Internal Sources:

1. Quicklink – St. Mary's Management Information system.
2. Year One Retention Data – St. Mary's Management Information system.
3. Student Engagement, Retention and Success Strategy Group: Action Plan 2015/16.
4. A copy of the questionnaire is available on request from daviesa@smuc.ac.uk

Case Study: Are You Ready for Drama St Mary's? Preparing students for vocational training programmes in Higher Education Institutions

Patsy Gilbert, Discipline Lead: Drama, St Mary's University, Twickenham

Rationale

Drama St Mary's is a suite of vocational undergraduate Drama programmes within St Mary's University, Twickenham. This case study reflects on preparing students for the demands of vocational training and changing expectations of our students as they join us through their pre-induction and induction activities. We aim to improve retention by thoroughly preparing our students for the discipline and commitment required by our courses and adapting this model for our ever changing, and improving, offer.

In 2009 this Drama department, which has been in operation for over 50 years, moved away from the theoretical reading of the subject of Drama. It began to work towards creating a Drama School model, with conservatoire level of training, within a university context, bringing with it academic rigour and theoretical enquiry to the work.

Research around the time suggested that more traditional Drama courses were not attracting student numbers – this was certainly the case for St Mary's where the joint honours model was losing students every year. Looking at recent continuation data students enrolled on joint honours (JH) Drama programmes were consistently more likely to not complete their programme of study in comparison to the single honours (SH) programmes. Between 2010 and 2015 continuation on SH pathways has average continuation of 93%, whereas on JH programmes the average is 83.6%. In order to revitalise the prospect of the courses, as well as develop a stronger graduate profile, the decision was made to create a suite of vocational programmes which would focus on the physical development of the student as an actor through a predominance of practical sessions. The JH programmes for Drama were closed in 2015 so that we could focus our efforts on the SH counterpart.

This change in emphasis brought with it three new SH pathway courses which reflected the diversity of the industry – Applied Theatre, Physical Theatre and Theatre Arts. The department also saw a shift in the lecturers who were delivering the programme – industry professionals who were bringing their relevant skills and experiences to the studio spaces, either as full time members of staff or as visiting lecturers. The department now employs over 50 visiting professionals every year to offer students precise and specific skills development sessions.

One of the biggest shifts in the practical demands of the students, and the university, was an increase in contact hours with the students. In 2009 students received 12 hours a week, now, in 2015, all pathway students have 30 hours of contact time a week. This was a considerable leap for our courses but, crucially for this case study, a very different offer to other HEI's who were offering Drama courses. We knew that in increasing these hours we would have to take extra care to ensure that potential students who join us, and who are applying for other HEI's, truly understand what 30 hours contact time a week means for the student. This meant not only highlighting potential benefits, but also the sacrifices that the student may have to make in order to sustain this work pattern.

In recent years, and in looking forward to our 2020 strategy, we aim to join other Drama conservatoires and HEIs in achieving Drama UK Accreditation. This quality kite mark ensures students that the training we offer '...is recognised by the drama profession as being relevant to the purpose of their employment' as well as '...confidence that the people they employ who have completed these courses have the skills and attributes required for the continuing health of the industry.' (Drama UK: n:pag) Criteria for this accreditation states that students on three year Actor training programmes should offer 30 student contact hours per week in practical classes and/or rehearsal for a minimum period of 90 weeks over 3 years. This has acted as a guide to professional values and hallmarks of best practice as we have grown and expanded our department since 2009 and will continue to do so in our future strategy

Before taking part in this *What Works? Student retention and success change programme* our retention and success figures were stable – our 93% average for students continuing the programme to completion is strong. Data also suggests that those students who left did so within the first semester. Students who withdrew later in the programme tended to be leaving because of circumstances beyond the university or programme's control – personal or financial reasons. We were also more aware of these students when they withdrew and could normally identify a reason for leaving and had been involved in working with that student to support their decision and, where possible, prevent withdrawal.

However, for the students who were leaving us in the first semester, and who we could have contact with, we were identifying a trend. Students hadn't completely understood before enrolling on the programme what the demands of the programme would be, or how different the nature of their course would be to other students within the university studying different fields. There was also a pattern of students moving from Drama programmes to other courses on offer within the institution, suggesting that the students were satisfied with other aspects of their university experience.

Interestingly, this also leads to another observation – students who have been most successful as part of the programme have identified as Drama St Mary's students, rather than as part of the wider university community. This trend is also reflected in the questionnaire data which is explored below.

Description/discussion of the intervention

As part of the HEA project Drama St Mary's focused on two main interventions in induction and pre-induction:

1. *Are You Ready? – Pre induction website*

www.stmarys.ac.uk/areyouready/drama

Website available from the time students accept their university offer, signposted by e-mails from the department directly to the potential student. Bringing together all information the students need to begin their programme of study – staff contacts and profiles, indicative and suggested reading, links to student services and advice around academic work. Throughout the summer this website is updated with induction week information and Drama St Mary's Theatre listings, encouraging students to return to the site.

2. *Interview information leaflets*

<http://www.stmarys.ac.uk/areyouready/drama/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/applied-theatre-leaflet.pdf>

Print materials given to students at open days and audition sessions outlining an indicative timetable with 30 hours, all modules in the first year with information about assessment and number of contact hours, graduates comments about the programme and accompanying images. The leaflets also give staff information so that students can contact staff directly with programme related questions.

Are You Ready? – Pre Induction Website

The 'Are You Ready?' Website was the first of the interventions we worked on and has taken the length of the project to get to a stage where we can fully appreciate its capacity and potential. Taking the *Are You Ready?* tagline from our pre-UCAS audition marketing we started to compile lists of information students said would be most helpful to them on beginning their course – this came from programme boards and module evaluation information. Due to the time constraints in these early stages we weren't able to bring together primary research around this topic from the current students but would endeavour to do that as the project progressed in order to improve the first pilot version.

From this small pool of evidence we were able to deduce that students had expressed a desire for the following information:

Staff pictures and contact information – so they knew who they would encounter on the first day and could contact in advance with any concerns.

Induction week information – so they could plan their activities ahead of arrival.

Suggested reading lists – particularly from the academic modules they would encounter in the first year.

Links to useful university services – although these are available through the main university site the students said they would prefer to have one point of contact to get all relevant information from.

Timetable information – so students could plan their work commitments around university classes.

And so this formed the basis of the first *Are You Ready?* Pre Induction site for Drama and over the length of the project we have updated and improved the information on offer.

Implementing a project such as this one has had its challenges. In the first year of its 'cycle' we discovered in collecting student questionnaire data that the students hadn't received the link to the website. Less than 5% of the incoming cohort had managed to find the site through search engines before arrival. As a result the data we collected around the site's effectiveness proved fruitless. This did lead to some very positive exchanges, particularly in improving the communication between departments in the university to make sure that the students' experience of pre-induction was holistic and consistent in its approach. The website was quickly embedded into the university's main online site, incorporating space for Business Management and Sports Science, as well as additional information for the Students Union and Student Support Services. We have also streamlined the information sent to students before they arrive – making sure to send all they need in small, manageable packages. These have been very positive steps in improving the students' induction process, as well as allowing us to work more creatively within this more robust structure.

Finally, in launching this website to the students Drama St Mary's sent personal e-mails to students sporadically throughout the summer after they accepted our offer. This allowed us to feed specific pieces of information which would keep the students interested and up-to-date with the programme in this long period waiting for their exam results. This also meant we could send the link for the *Are You Ready?* Site as soon as their place was confirmed, giving each student a more personalised 'service' as they began their transition to HE.

Interview Information Leaflets

The *interview information leaflets* were created with the help of students who we enlisted to join us as part of the HEA residential. We questioned these students directly about what their expectations of the programme had been before they arrived and how they thought the course fared against those expectations now they were in their third year. The students were very forthcoming with responses about what they expected before the course and how different their experiences were.

This gave us the opportunity to begin thinking about pre-induction, not only as

something which happens from the moment the students accept their offer, but from the moment the students are interested in applying to us. We started to question whether one way of ensuring improved retention and success was to make sure we were attracting the right students from the moment of application and that students who were accepting our offer were making a specific decision to become part of our distinct community.

From this we created the *interview information leaflets* which made the modules, assessment and weekly contact hours transparent to the students as well as something tangible that could be shown to other 'stakeholders' in their education – friends and family. This was a particular consideration the students proposed.

These leaflets were distributed during the recruitment campaign for 2015 entry and as well as the data collected at induction (included below) some differences were immediately apparent - we were receiving far more enquiries about the courses to us directly, rather than through the centralised university channels which gave us an opportunity to tailor our responses more personally to the student. The leaflets also changed the structure of our open days and audition days where students were more informed about the programmes in their interviews with staff and had more focused questions about the course content.

Questionnaire data – September 2015

In order to get a more accurate reflection of the students who had been through this whole cycle of pre-induction, including both interventions, a questionnaire was conducted during induction week with all Level 4 students in September 2015. This questionnaire aimed to collect data, both qualitative and quantitative, which explored what the students expected from their programme of study before beginning their scheduled classes. This process ensured that the data collected was specifically centred around the pre-induction activities and not from the course as they had experienced it.

There were 86 responses to the questionnaire from 92 students enrolled on the programme. From the 86 respondents 63 responded positively when asked if they received an *interview information leaflet* at open day or audition day. A further 18 students commented that they received the leaflet through the *Are You Ready?* pre-induction site. 77 students said they received the link to the *Are You Ready?* pre-entry website, and over 80% of those students said they received that information through the e-mails sent specifically from the Drama St Mary's team, with only 8% commenting they received the link through the university centralised induction information.

In response to the question 'Why did you apply to Drama St Mary's?' the highest totals came for the *programme* (67), *contact hours* (54), *location* (52) and *links to the industry* (44).

Students identified *Induction Week Activities* (61) and *Staff Recommended Reading* (46) as the most useful information provided as part of the pre-entry site.

In response to the questions ‘How successful were these resources in helping you choose to study with Drama St Mary’s?’ and ‘...in giving you the information you needed to begin your programme with Drama St Mary’s?’ the *interview information leaflets* and *Are You Ready?* site were consistently higher in the *very good* and *excellent* categories than the main St Mary’s University website.

Most importantly from 86 respondents 80 students said they felt prepared for their programme of study (*Prepared* – 24, *well prepared* – 43, *very prepared* – 13).

In the qualitative responses students were asked to comment on their expectations of Drama St Mary’s in a range of areas, focusing on information they had been sent before beginning their programme of study – these included; *Contact Hours, Staff, Values, Academic Work, Other students, Quality of Work, Graduate Employment* and *Links to the Profession*. Overall there are trends to be identified in the use of terminology about the programme – all of which suggest a very high level of expectation from the students and a heightened awareness of Drama St Mary’s ‘offer’.

In response to expectation of *Contact Hours* on the programme 100% of respondents commented on the demanding nature of the programme with a range of different emphases. For example:

“30 hours”

“Very good hours, full on”

“Large amount, synonymous with Drama UK Schools”

“More than other Drama courses I looked at at other unis”

Over 75% commented directly that the course offered 30 contact hours.

Other notable comments were recorded in the question surrounding students’ expectations of our programme’s *Values*. Although there were less responses here the comments, again, show a trend in the terminology and vocabulary being used to describe our work:

“Hard working and dedicated”

“If you work hard you get a lot out of it”

“Professionalism, wanting the best for students”

“Not being late/respectful to student/staff”

Expectation in relation to *Academic Work* was far more varied – some students commenting on this as an extension of their practical work, others seeing ‘academic’ as just the lecture/seminar portion of the programme, resulting in a written assessment.

"Demanding"

"More practical work, some essays"

"Hardly any"

"Not too much academic work is good for me. I prefer more practical aspects."

These comments are interesting to observe because there is a noticeable disconnect between 'practical' and 'academic' – students seeing this as being a small component of their 30 hours a week (which is correct – only 3 hours a week are based in lecture seminar), but not considering the portion of the overall degree which relies on written assessment, which is currently 20 credits in each semester (one third of the overall degree).

Continuation data for the programme throughout the length of the project has seen some movement, but it is difficult to attribute this directly to the interventions created due to the problems we experienced earlier on in the project ensuring students had access to the resources etc. The continuation data we hold shows large discrepancies between students enrolled on SH and JH programmes – but this was not focused on within this case study as our JH programmes were set to close in 2015. Because of this the above questionnaire data is a more accurate representation of how these interventions specifically have changed the attitudes of students joining us in 2015. In the coming year we will be able to link our continuation data more closely to these specific innovations and would hope to then develop these resources according to student feedback and retention.

What is evident throughout the questionnaires data is that students identify very closely with the Drama programmes, rather than the whole university. It would be reasonable to assume that with the 30 contact hours and particular vocational focus of the programmes that this connection to the pathways, rather than the institution, will become even more prevalent throughout their three years. In the next part of this project we endeavour to look towards whether this strengthened link to the programmes, or potential disconnect with the institution, may have an impact later on in the students programme of study, as well as how we can manage and continue to meet students expectation as our reputation grows. This will come from further analysis of our retention and success statistics, National Student Survey responses and graduate employment results. This in turn could lead to much larger questions about the future of vocational training and its place in Higher Education Institutions

– whether we are equipped for the demands for programmes such as these, whether potential students understand the differences between the courses on offer and whether, most crucially for this project, we are able to maintain positive levels of student retention and success.

References

Drama UK https://www.dramauk.co.uk/what_is_accreditation

Accessed 01/11/15

Case Study: Induction activities for sport science students: Nothing works for everyone....

Gill McInnes, Discipline Lead: Sport Science, St Mary's University, Twickenham

Rationale

The Sport Science programme at St Mary's University takes in around 200 students each year. Of these three quarters are single honours students, while one quarter combine sport science with another programme. Prior to the What Works? Project there was already an induction programme in place for sport science students that had been developed over a number of years, but it had never been formally evaluated. The project prompted us to review the programme with both staff and students, including conducting interviews and focus groups with the students in research methods modules, to find out what they thought of the induction process. One thing that was difficult throughout the case study was to separate what we did because of the What Works? Project, and what we would have done anyway, therefore both have been included.

At the start of the project we attended a workshop about the first phase of the What Works? Project (Thomas, 2012) where we were pleased to discover that we had already implemented many of the recommendations, such as avoiding talking at students, overloading them with information, the importance of providing social opportunities for the students to make friends, and of continuing induction throughout the first year rather than just in one week at the start. We were already persuaded of the importance of induction to retention and success, as has been widely reported in the literature (Crosling, Thomas, & Heagney, 2008; Yorke & Longdon, 2007).

Description/discussion of the intervention

The induction programme that we have developed largely takes place during "Freshers' Week" at the start of the academic year. This includes central University events as well as programme-specific activities. Each programme is allocated two timetabled slots during the week to use as they see fit. We had already realised that the students suffered from information overload during that week therefore, in my welcome talk as programme director, I say very little before sending the students off with their academic tutors. The whole cohort each year is around 200 students, while there are 20 tutor groups each of around ten students. The smaller group size allows the students to interact with each other

and with their tutor and to ask any questions that they might not feel confident to ask in a larger group. Various ice-breaker activities are employed to help the students get to know one another. Each tutor gives out individual timetables to the students and then they stroll around campus so that they can chat and the tutor can point out key places such as the rooms where the students will be taught the following week. The students are also given a “To Do” list of essential tasks to complete that will help them settle in, such as, “Make sure you can access your uni email account and send your tutor an email from that account so that they know you’ve done it.”

The second block of programme time in induction week is used for a sports and activities afternoon where the tutor groups compete against each other in a variety of events such as orienteering, a “pub quiz”, human pyramid, initiative test, and three-legged relay. The afternoon is organised by the PhD students in the department, but all tutors are involved in helping to run the activities and at the end of the day to lead a debriefing session where teamwork is discussed – did they work well as a team, did anyone emerge as a leader, could they have done anything better, and what would they do if they had an assignment involving group work and one member was not pulling their weight? This begins to prepare them should it actually happen.

The same induction activities continued during the What Works? Project but some new ones were also introduced. The first phase of the project (Thomas, 2012) had reinforced the importance of social events, opportunities to make friends and interact with students and staff. The project also gave us access to some funds that we wouldn’t have had otherwise. Hence, we arranged for the students and tutors to have a free drink in the Students’ Union at the end of the sports afternoon. Interestingly, only about half the students came along; most of the ones who lived off campus chose to go home. It was a Friday evening and they tend to have social lives at home, and become less involved in University-based social activities than the students who live on campus. It appears that they become less integrated in university life, come in for lectures but then go straight home afterwards. Certainly, we have not been successful in reversing this trend, or we did not find the right activities to do so, or perhaps we needed to give the students more warning as we had only told them that week about the free drink. We also put on a free breakfast one morning, preceded by a walk/jog/run round the campus with the tutors, but only three students turned up. We had forgotten that Freshers’ Week tends to preclude early mornings!

The start of the project coincided with the introduction of a newly validated research methods and study skills module that runs every week for three hours in first semester. The module is taught by academic tutors which means that the students continue to get to know their tutors beyond Freshers’ Week, and develop relevant skills in a small group setting with peers that they have already got to know, so it is a relatively safe environment in which to make mistakes and ask questions. The module involves the students taking part

in a simple research project, and learning the skills necessary to carry out the project and to write it up as a research paper. The assessment includes five small tasks each worth 5% of the module mark, and a final report worth 75%. The students hand in the tasks during class sessions, and peer-mark one another's work. The tutor also provides feedback on the work, and then the students have the chance to improve that section before submitting it as part of the final report. We have found that students are more likely to complete these formative tasks if there is a small percentage of marks attached to each one. Many students take the opportunity to respond to the feedback and improve their work, but some do not try to do this, apparently are content just to pass. The module also includes several sessions on qualitative research, and one session involves the students interviewing one another or conducting focus groups about the induction activities. The outcome of these is reported later in this paper.

The main change that was made as a result of the project was that we were able to provide pre-induction information to the students by means of giving them access to a site on Blackboard prior to them arriving and registering at St Mary's. This was extremely difficult to set up and I spent quite a bit of time between various departments such as Registry and IT, being told that it was not possible. In the end it was facilitated by the Director of Teaching and Learning who was also the institution lead for the What Works? Project. This represented a considerable breakthrough and may not have been possible without the backing of senior staff for the project. We put up information that we hoped would be helpful to the students, including video clips of current students saying what they liked about sport science at St Mary's and what they wished they had known before they arrived. At the same time, the Drama programme which is also part of the project, was trying to develop a website to serve a similar purpose. In fact, the following year, all three programmes in the project were provided with a website and we were told that we could no longer use the Blackboard site. This was disappointing as we had invested quite a bit of work in it, and felt that we lacked the skills to develop the website. The Drama website is fantastic because the discipline lead has the skills and motivation to develop it, but it is an illustration that one size will not fit all, and any outcomes of the project should recognise this.

One other initiative that I introduced was a "settled score". I contacted the students each month and asked them to send me a score from 1 to 9 that represented how settled they felt at St Mary's, where 1 meant that they were entirely settled, and 9 meant that they were about to leave. If their score was below five, I emailed them and asked if they would like to come for a chat, and did the same in subsequent months if their score went down. Many would reply to say they were fine, had just been worried about a piece of work, or been upset by something not necessarily to do with university, but some did come to chat. I was able to help most of these, or to refer them to the relevant student services, but some did leave (often a very brave decision) and I was able to support them through this.

What worked

We conducted focus group interviews with students in research methods modules in order to find out how they found their induction to Sport Science at St Mary's. We were pleased with the induction week activities and the students commented positively about them. They provided a good introduction to the sport science programme without information overload, and that the students seemed to enjoy them. They provided a good balance between providing programme information, and facilitating opportunities for students to make friends, to socialise with both peers and tutors, and to share concerns about starting university. The video clips of current students were also intended to ease these concerns, but we discovered through the interviews and focus groups that very few students had accessed the pre-induction site. We also discovered that almost all students found the meetings with their tutor helpful and enjoyable, they liked getting to know their tutor and making friends in a small group, they found the "To Do" list helpful, the email to the tutor enabled us to identify a small number of students that needed help with writing or might be dyslexic, and the students liked being given an individual timetable but would have liked it before they arrived. The University is currently working hard on its timetabling system in order to do allow students to access personal timetables online; this will benefit second and third year students as well as first years.

One unexpected finding was that, while the majority of students enjoyed the sports afternoon, not all of them did. Some found it patronising, especially the orienteering, and some said they wanted to get started on academic work sooner. A few of the students who lived off campus said that they felt it could have all been done in one day so that they didn't have to travel in twice, although once the timetable starts they have to come in three times a week. We are discussing whether some academic content could be added to one of the sessions in order to address these concerns. The social events that were added outside the timetable (breakfast walk/run and free drink) did not work well and, in the absence of funding, have been discontinued.

The majority of negative comments in the interviews and focus groups were about the central induction events rather than at programme level. It seems that there is too much dissemination of information in traditional large lecture settings, and it could be reviewed how much of this is essential to deliver in the first week. The study skills module, and the use of online resources, has allowed us to spread out the delivery of programme information over several months. Even with this, some students report that there is too much to take in.

One unfortunate thing that happened in the current year was that the University changed the pattern of our induction sessions so that the informal session (sports afternoon) came

before the more formal one (meeting tutors). This was done with good intentions and in response to feedback from other programmes, but is another example of one size not fitting all. I have asked to revert to the previous pattern next year.

I have already mentioned that we preferred the pre-induction Blackboard site to the website, partly because of our own lack of skill in setting up the website, but also because we felt that it was a good opportunity for students to get used to the medium that they would be using once teaching starts. However, the interviews revealed that the pre-induction information had not been publicised effectively, and so very few students actually accessed it. This is something that we will have to address.

The research methods and study skills module in semester one has been a success. Again, the students report that they like working in a small group, they are able to support one another with their learning, they like seeing their tutor every week, and the tutors like teaching it. The students' research skills have improved and, while it is not possible to establish a causal relationship, the quality of work and marks for laboratory reports in physiology and biomechanics have improved.

The settled score has proved to be a quick, simple, and effective way to touch base with a large cohort of students. I tell them that they can just send a number; they don't need to compose a polite email. Many students in the interviews said that they liked the settled score because it made them feel that someone cared. When they send their score I reply with a 😊 or a message asking if they are OK and want to chat. The settled ones said they liked getting the smiley face although there was one who said they would not have put a bad score anyway because they would not want to be "followed up". The less settled ones liked feeling that there was support available, and a small number (10-15 each year) actually came to chat. Several of these said that they thought they would have left otherwise, and one in each year did leave. This was a worthwhile outcome but there were quite a few students that did not engage at all; they did not send a score or come to chat, and a higher proportion of this group ended up leaving than of the ones who did engage with the settled score initiative. Again, it seems that nothing works for everyone, but having a variety of different approaches is likely to increase the chances of at least one thing reaching each person.

Evidence of the impact

The students were surveyed as part of the project in November of each of the three years and the results are shown in Table 1 below (Yorke, 2014). The scores are out of a maximum of five. Yorke (2014) points out that the scores should not be compared across the scales and that the differences may not be statistically significant, so it is difficult to draw conclusions:

“In reading these scores, it should not be assumed that a score of, say, 3.96 for Engagement is the same as 3.96 for Self-confidence. Each scale is made up of different items, to which students (obviously) respond differently. Any comparisons should be kept within particular scales.”

“Small differences between the scores of different groups are of no practical importance. I have not undertaken tests of statistical significance since the responses do not meet the sampling criteria that should be applied (but are frequently ignored).”

Table 1. Comparison of measures across the three years of the What Works? project

	Belongingness	Engagement	Self-confidence
2013	3.97	3.62	3.53
2014	4.22	3.89	3.71
2015	3.70	3.99	3.68

Broadly, engagement improved across the three years, belongingness improved and then declined (possibly because there were a larger number of students living off campus in 2015), self-confidence was slightly better in the two later cohorts, and overall the 2014 cohort seemed to be the most content on the three measures. Further analysis would be necessary to try to understand these patterns.

Analysis of retention data for the sport science programme suggests that continuation improved over the duration of the What Works? Project (see figure 1 below), but it is impossible to say whether this represents a causal relationship; there are so many factors that affect students’ lives. There were no significant differences between single and joint honours cohorts.

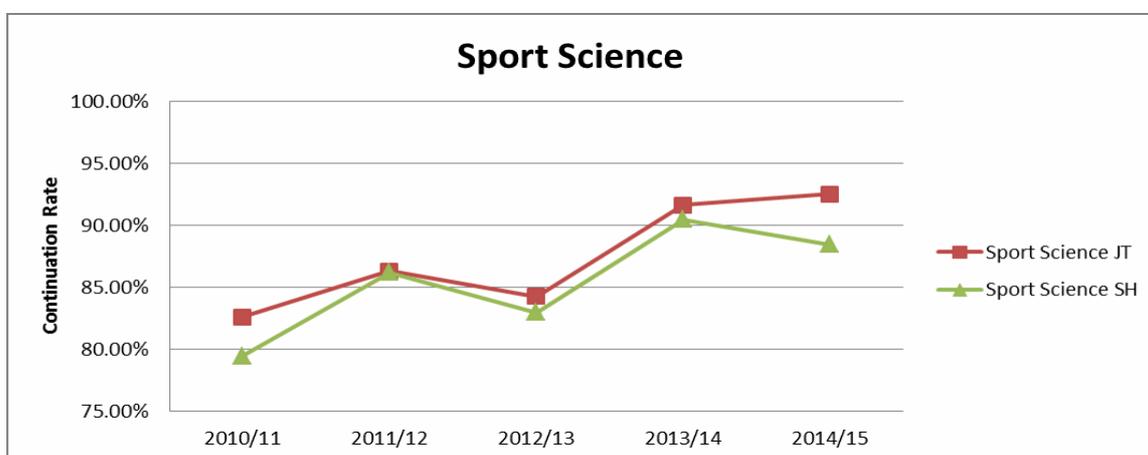


Figure 1. Continuation rates for sport science students between 2010/11 and 2014/15

Sustainability

The sport science induction programme will be continued, and we will try to make improvements each year. The pre-induction information will be reviewed and, whichever format goes forward, we will endeavour to publicise it more effectively. We will ask for the pattern in Freshers' Week to revert to having the tutor sessions first and the sports afternoon second, and we will add some academic content. We hope that the University will be able to provide online timetables prior to the students' arrival and will do what is needed at programme level to facilitate this. We will review the orienteering activity to ensure that it is sufficiently challenging. The research methods/study skills module will continue to be refined, and taught by academic tutors. We will pass on the comments about the central induction programme to the relevant departments.

Lessons Learnt

1. One size does not fit all; nothing works for everyone; there will always be some students who are unwilling to engage at all. This is fine as long as they are happy, but having a variety of approaches is likely to reach more of them.
2. It is OK for programmes to do different things; if programme teams are not motivated by something, they are unlikely to make it work.
3. Please check with programme leaders before changing things that may have been working well.
4. Obstacles can be overcome if different departments are prepared to work together to the same end.

Many thanks to the HEA, Action on Access, and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, for the opportunity to be part of the project.

References

Crosling, G., Thomas, L., & Heagney, M. (eds.) (2008). *Improving student retention in higher education*. New York: Routledge Falmer.

Thomas, L. (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change: Final report from the What Works? Student retention & success programme*. York: Higher Education Academy.

Yorke, M., & Longden, B. (2007) *The first-year experience in higher education in the UK: Report on Phase 1 of a project funded by the Higher Education Academy*, London: The Higher Education Academy.

Yorke, M. (2014). *The development and initial use of a survey of student 'belongingness', engagement and self-confidence in UK higher education*. Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education (online).

