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Supporting Art and Design student transition into Higher Education

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Abstract: *In 2007 the UK National Audit Office reported retention levels as an important factor in measuring university success. It also reported institutional variations in withdrawal themes concluding that some differences were likely to relate to how well individual institutions were helping students to deal with the challenges of study in HE. As a great deal of research has found retention to be related to student satisfaction, and this in turn to be primarily dependent upon student preparedness and their expectations many institutions have focused on enhancing this area of the student experience. This paper raises awareness of the predominant role of emotions and social interactions in art and design pedagogy and describes the development and implementation of an online portal designed to support a cohort of students about to undertake a BA (Hons) Fashion Design and Technology programme. Support was designed to promote early induction and engagement and to assist in student's preparation, six weeks before arriving at university. The project followed the ADDIE development model and adopted a multi-phase sequential mixed methods research strategy. Evaluation of this project inter-mixed focus groups and semi-structured questionnaires over five key research phases targeted at appropriate stages of the ADDIE development model.*

Keywords: *Transition, Pre-entry, Retention, Withdrawal, Art and Design.*

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Introduction and background

Retention levels are an important factor in measuring success of UK Higher Education (HE) institutions. However, with one in five full time students reported as failing to complete their studies (National Audit Office 2007) improving retention is high on many institutional agendas.

Studies have found retention to be related to student satisfaction, and this in turn to be primarily dependent upon student preparedness and expectations of HE study (e.g. Charlton et al. 2006 Lowe and Cook 2003). A recurring theme in studies of student performance is that experiences in the first few weeks are vital in students' decisions to withdraw (e.g. Fitzgibbon and Prior 2003 Tinto 1988). However, it is generally recognised that the whole first year experience is crucial in determining persistence decisions (e.g. Yorke 2000 Fitzgibbon and Prior 2003 Johnson 1994). Consequently, universities have been encouraged to review their induction procedures to better support student transition to HE.

Research exploring student induction generally agrees that academic, social and personal adjustments are the most important factors determining successful progression through tertiary education (The Higher Education Academy 2006). Furthermore, it is widely recognised that induction should be thought of as an on-going process beginning when students first establish contact with an institution and continuing up until the end of the first year (e.g. Hamshire and Cullen 2010 Shock Absorber Project 2007).

At Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) a Student Induction and Transition framework (SIT 2009) has been developed splitting the first year into three periods: Pre-entry and early transition; Welcome weeks / early induction period; Ongoing induction. This framework provides a structure for the development of induction processes.

During the 2008/09 academic year the BA (Hons) Fashion Design and Technology (FDT) programme in the Faculty of Art and Design identified several issues of concern including:

57% of 1st year students with attendance levels below 70%.

Overall programme retention rate of 79% (below the institutional requisite of 85%).

The biggest contribution to retention figures being level 4 students (first year undergraduate).

Typically the programme recruits students based on A-level or equivalent qualifications. The perception of the programme team was that students struggled with the transition from more formal teacher centred learning they are familiar with, at A-level, to teaching approaches that demand high levels of self-direction and personal motivation. Consequently, the decision was taken to develop new induction procedures for the programme, based on the SIT (2009) framework.

This paper describes and evaluates the implementation and development of an online portal for the FDT programme targeting the core issues identified above, during the pre-entry and early transitional period of induction.

Development approach and research methodology

The project followed the ADDIE development model, a five-stage instructional design process for courses and educational programmes (Peterson 2003). A multi-

phase sequential mixed methods research strategy was used to undertake evaluative research through the development process.

The approach combined multiple data collection methods with different weaknesses but complementary strengths, providing convergent and divergent evidence relating to the study (Johnson and Turner 2003). A focus group (video recorded semi-structured group interviews) and semi-structured questionnaires (intra-mixing both open and closed question types) were inter-mixed in five key phases at appropriate stages of the ADDIE model. Where appropriate, purposeful samples of users and non-users of the portal were used. An overview of activities is provided in Table 1.

Ethical approval was received from the Faculty research ethics committee. Students' participation in all aspects of the study was voluntary and those participating in the focus group signed consent forms.

Analysis of data

The focus group (Phase 1) was transcribed into text and subjected to thematic analysis. A nomothetic approach was used to identify 'key areas' or 'themes' in the participants' transition experience. A constructivist viewpoint was adopted in order to "step beyond the known and enter into the world of participants to see the world from their perspective" (Corbin and Strauss 2008, 16).

Open questions in the online surveys (phase 2-5) were collated; basic descriptive statistics were calculated and then used to generate appropriate tables and histograms.

Closed questions in the online surveys (phase 2-5) were subject to thematic analysis following the same approach as for the focus group transcripts.

Table 2. Overview of the development process and related research activities

Dates	ADDIE stage activities	Research activities
6 th May 2009	Analysis Gathering of information and requirements to inform development of the online portal	Two separate phases were involved in analysis stage. Phase 1. Qualitative research. Exploration of transitional experiences. Use of small focus group with five 2008/2009 level 5 FDT students.
6 th July 2009		Phase 2. Quantitative and qualitative research. Use of an online questionnaire to investigate pre-entry concerns and individual needs (based on outcomes from Phase 1). Completed by 75% of incoming (2009/10) FDT students.
May-July 2009	Design Portal design based and informed by requirements identified through analysis of Phase 1 and Phase 2.	Formative evaluation of phase 1 & 2 undertaken.
July-August 2009	Development Portal built using Adobe GoLive.	
24 th August 2009	Implementation Portal accessible to students four weeks before the start of term. Invitation to portal sent via letter and students home email.	Use of the portal (including forum) was monitored throughout. First use of the portal took place 26 th August 2009.
6 th October (2 weeks into study)		Phase 3. Quantitative and qualitative research. Use of an online questionnaire to explore student's early experiences of the course and portal. 67% of the new (2009/10) FDT students responded.
6 th November (6 weeks in)		Phase 4. Quantitative and qualitative research. Use of an online questionnaire to explore student's on-going experiences of the course and portal. 84% of the new (2009/10) FDT students responded.
15 th December 2009 (final week of the 1st academic term)	Evaluation Full summative evaluation draws on results of all of research phases (1-5).	Phase 5. Quantitative and qualitative questionnaire. Use of an online questionnaire to determine student's overall induction experience of users and non-users of the portal. 51% of the new (2009/10) FDT students responded.

Phase 1 and 2: results and design implications

Analysis of the phase 1 focus group and phase 2 questionnaires identified seven key issues with design implications for the proposed FDT portal. These are outlined and discussed below.

Issue 1

Participants in the focus groups (level 5 students) suggested that students often felt isolated at the start of their Higher Education experience:

The first year is really hard I think to deal with like being away from home and with these people you don't know and stuff. I found it really lonely. Student 5

Such feelings of isolation have been associated with the emotional complexity of the transition to HE (Shock Absorber 2007). Interestingly, the experience of the level 5 students is slightly at odds with incoming (level 4) students who provided mainly positive emotional responses (e.g. excited and raring to go) and low levels of anxiety and stress (Figure 81). This suggests the incoming students have some difficulty in envisaging the emotionally transformative experience (Austerlitz 2008) they are about to undertake.

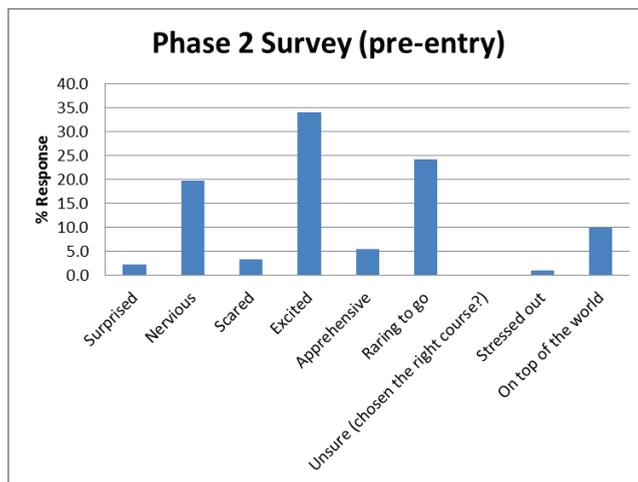


Figure 81. Phase 2 Survey Q1: Incoming (level 4) student's feelings about coming to university

DESIGN IMPLICATIONS. THE PORTAL SHOULD:

- Provide provision of support in order to buffer the emotional experience of transition to HE study.
- Provide support for social transition into HE.

Issue 2

The focus group participants suggested providing prospective students with the opportunity to meet and get to know peers and current students before starting the course:

It would help to know that other people have got the same worries as you. You're not the only one freaking out that you're going to be the only one living in Halls

and stuff like that. It would help you to know that there are other people who are going through the same. Student 4

In addition, 79 % of prospective students who responded to the phase 2 questionnaire acknowledged they would value the opportunity to meet and make friends with others in their cohort before starting on the course.

DESIGN IMPLICATIONS. THE PORTAL SHOULD:

- Enable the development of peer support networks before the start of the course.
- Deploy a third year student to act as mentor within an online forum in the portal.
- Provide an opportunity to meet with other new students before arriving at university.

Issue 3

The focus group discussions on preparing for university centred on practicalities of living away from home (e.g. accommodation and buying pots and pans) rather than any anticipated differences in the teaching, learning and assessment:

I just bought saucepans...and bed sheets I didn't do anything else. Student 5

I just came. You had your break and you had to find somewhere to live so that was the main thing. Student 2

80% of the incoming students reported concerns that can be categorized into **Finance/lack of money**, Living away from home/homesickness, **Study load**, Anxiety, Low self esteem and **Making friends**. Interestingly, similar issues (in bold above) were found by Yorke (2000) and the NAO report (2007).

The focus group also felt that a portal environment could enable prospective students to find answers to basic questions and address concerns by talking to other new students:

I think it's a really good idea [the proposed portal]. I would've liked to have had someone to talk to first beforehand. I'd want to see where they were staying and like what they thought. Student 1

DESIGN IMPLICATIONS. THE PORTAL SHOULD:

- Provide easily accessible advice on practicalities of living and working away from home.
- Deploy a third year student to act as mentor within an online forum in the portal.
- Provide an opportunity to meet with other new students before arriving at university.

Issue 4

Some focus group participants seemed to lack confidence and expressed surprise that they have been given a place on the course. This appears to originate from misinformation provided by advisers during application:

They [our teachers] said you can't get in [to MMU] it's too hard and only people from Manchester and really good students get on the course. They just said there's no point [in applying] basically. Student 2

The incoming students surveyed did not appear to be lacking in confidence with 94% reporting being excited and 65% that they were raring to go. Although about half also reported feeling nervous the majority were clearly enthusiastic at the prospect of coming to university.

DESIGN IMPLICATIONS. THE PORTAL SHOULD:

- Provide a welcoming and encouraging environment and seek to build upon student's confidence and self-worth.
- Utilise and capitalise on the high levels of enthusiasm that students feel on first arriving at university.

Issue 5

The focus group also revealed some confusion with the pedagogic nature of art and design study where "many 'right' answers may exist" (Austerlitz et al. 2008, 127):

Tutors must communicate with each other much more so you're not telling us [the students] two different things and be more clear don't presume we [the students] understand anything - break-it-down. Student 5

This highlights, to some extent, a mismatch between student's expectations and the realities of studying in HE. Unlike other subjects with more inherent solidity and certainty, the ambiguous nature of Art and Design, where learning activities are often open to suggestion and interpretation, can bring about feelings of uncertainty and anxiety for students (Ewings 2008). As expectations are known to impact on students' adjustment to university (Jackson et al. 2000) it is important to manage these.

DESIGN IMPLICATIONS. THE PORTAL SHOULD:

- Provide opportunities for students to adjust their expectations of studying Art and Design before coming to university.
- Prepare students for the realities of HE teaching, learning and assessment.

Issue 6

Participants in the focus group were unprepared for the level of autonomy and self-direction expected of them:

You need to be prepared...not for anything to be spoon fed to you like it was in college or on foundation... they [the tutors] don't just hand out to you. You have to go to the library and look on the Internet for books that they've recommended to you and you have to go and get them books yourself... It's you're an adult now you kind of expected to do everything for yourself. Student 3

Furthermore, focus group participants felt that communication with current students about their academic experience would be useful in providing an insight into the work and level of the course:

You [portal designer] could definitely put some work on there so you [the student] can kind of see what you're going to be doing. Student 4

DESIGN IMPLICATIONS. THE PORTAL SHOULD:

- Set learning, teaching and assessment expectations and explain how academics skills will be developed during the course.
- Provide real examples of learning activities and work.
- Deploy a third year student to act as mentor within the portal.

Issue 7

Some difficult early experiences had led to low morale in focus group participants and general cohort. This had impacted negatively on some students' engagement with the course and ultimately some withdrew simply because they had become personally unhappy:

There was a lot of negativity in our course in the first year. I think a lot of people have kind of brought each other down and I think that's why so many people end up quitting or not coming in. Student 4

This could be linked to feelings of isolation identified in *Issue 1* as there is an emotional element to issues of morale.

The focus group subsequently explored the some times mixed emotional aspects of engagement with tutors. The group felt it would ease future students' anxiety if they got to know programme tutors a little before arriving at university via the proposed portal:

...so that you [the student] recognise people and you kind of know what they're [members of staff] like and kind of feel more relaxed when they walk into the room. Student 3

Austerlitz (2007) showed that tutor/student relations can significantly impact upon students' motivation and feelings of self-worth and it would seem appropriate to facilitate effective tutor/students relationships as early as possible.

DESIGN IMPLICATIONS. THE PORTAL SHOULD:

- Enable peer support networks to develop quickly.
- Enable students to find out about and engage with key members of the programme team before coming to university.
- Provide a quick and easy way for students to communicate directly with the level 4-year tutor.

Design of the portal

The site map (Figure 2) is a schematic representation of the portal design based on the requirements identified in phase 1 & 2. The inner circle represents the portal itself and extending beyond - the provision of all the preparatory and support resources, with URL links and individual Internet addresses. A screen shot of the FDT portal homepage can be seen in Figure 3.

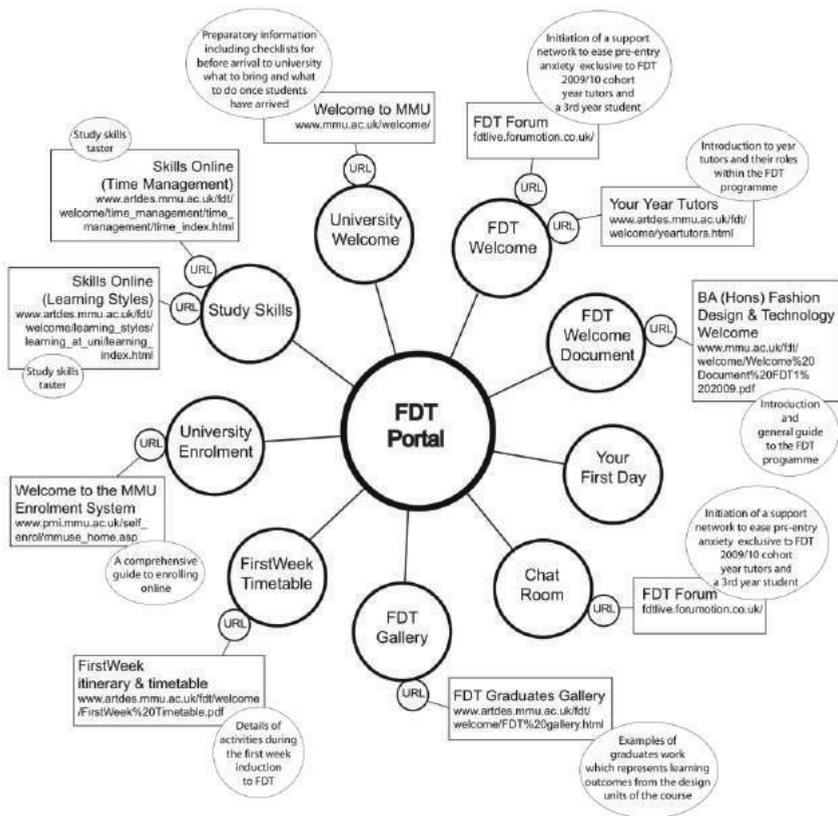


Figure 82 Site map illustrating layout of the FDT portal and URL links directing students to support resources.

University Welcome

The University has a welcome website with useful information such as advice about what to bring, what happens when you arrive and important dates:

<http://www.mmu.ac.uk/welcome>

Skills Online

Once you arrive at uni you will be able to access MMU's online study skills package. This will support you in developing the necessary skills you need to study and progress successfully at this level. It is designed to be used to complement your programme-based teaching and learning activities. Although you should always take the advice of your programme tutors first and foremost - the resource is aimed at all students to help you become the most effective learner you can.

To help with your preparation for study at university - the following links will give you a taste of the study skills resource:



Time Management

Some strategies you could use to help you to prioritise your time.



Learning Styles

What type of learner are you? What motivates you?

University Enrolment

This portal is for online socialising and support and is NOT part of your official University enrolment. Click on the link below to find out how to enrol online:

[University's online enrolment system](#)



Fashion drawing by FDT first year student Emma Lakshmi 10/2009

Welcome

all new Fashion Design and Technology students

This online facility has been produced to help in your preparation for university. Please follow the links which will introduce you to aspects of university life - the chat room will enable you to meet your new peers before you arrive so be sure to log in to say hello!



To view your FirstWeek itinerary & timetable click on the link below:

[FIRSTWEEK](#)

This is the first two pages of an information pack you will receive when you arrive.

FDT Welcome

Get your questions answered and meet your future classmates in the FDT forum

This is a great chance to find out more about your future year group and make friends before you arrive. It is a good idea to add a photo to your profile so you will be recognised when you get here.

Ask the student forum mentor about their experiences or maybe chat to your year tutors before you arrive at MMU.

[Click here to enter the chat room](#)

Before You Arrive

The chat room is a good place to get your questions answered before you arrive.

Another good place to get information on the course is the FDT student welcome booklet which we ask you to print out and read before arriving.

[Welcome Document](#)

Your First Day

When you arrive on Monday 21st September you will continue your induction into the course and the University. Please meet in room 62 (this space use to be a college gym) Hollings campus at 10:00 am.

Here you will receive the information you need at this stage:

FDT Gallery

Take the opportunity to look at our 2009 graduates work by clicking the link to the gallery:

[FDT Gallery](#)

Figure 83 The FDT portal homepage

The portal was built using Adobe GoLive, Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML) editor and web site management application from Adobe Systems and hosted on the MMU Art and Design Internet Server, where students could access the support without being formally enrolled on the course.

Phase 3 and 4: formative evaluation of the student transition and FDT portal

Developing peer support networks

Both the phase 3 and 4 surveys indicate that the majority of students had begun to develop academic and social peer support networks. Within the first two weeks of study, the majority (83%) of the students had made friends, which they could talk to about course study problems (Table 2, Phase 3, Q1). While 70% had already made friends that they could talk to about personal problems (Table 2, Phase 3, Q1). After 6 weeks 82% had friends on the course to help them in times of stress (Table 2, Phase 4, Q7). These findings are very positive as it is widely suggested that being part of such networks enhances the first year experience (e.g. York and Longden, 2008).

Table 3. Phase 3 & 4 survey results

Phase 3 survey (6th October 2009): Transition to University: how is it for you? N=30 (67%)

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q1. I now have friends on the course that I can talk to about course study problems	14 (46%)	11 (37%)	5 (17%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Q2. I already have friends on the course that I can talk to about personal problems	10 (33%)	11 (37%)	6 (20%)	3 (10%)	0 (0%)
Q3. Meeting the year tutor within the portal before arriving at university made the first day less daunting.	11 (37%)	12 (40%)	6 (20%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
Q4. I feel I can ask tutors questions when I'm stuck	8 (27%)	18 (60%)	3 (10%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
Q5. Visiting links on the FDT portal help me to understand the course better	6 (20%)	18 (60%)	5 (17%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
Q6. I'm finding the work much harder than expected	1 (3%)	4 (13%)	8 (27%)	13 (43%)	4 (13%)
Q7. I am enjoying new and interesting ways to work	8 (27%)	16 (53%)	5 (17%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
Q8. During study tasks I feel happy to work on my own	12 (40%)	16 (53%)	2 (7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Q9. Starting at university was a very emotional time for me	3 (10%)	4 (13%)	10 (33%)	8 (27%)	5 (17%)
Q10. With hindsight I wish I had used the FDT portal more to prepare for university	2 (7%)	9 (30%)	7 (23%)	11 (37%)	1 (3%)

Phase 4 survey: Adjusting to University: how are you finding it six weeks in? N=38 (84%)

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q2. Our workload is much more than expected	8 (21%)	19 (50%)	7 (18%)	4 (11%)	0 (0%)
Q3. The course is exactly what I expected	2 (5%)	8 (21%)	24 (63%)	4 (11%)	0 (0%)
Q4. I am concerned about my time management	7 (21%)	18 (47%)	10 (26%)	3 (8%)	0 (0%)
Q5. I thought we would get more help from tutors	5 (13%)	21 (55%)	6 (16%)	6 (16%)	0 (0%)
Q6. Lack of money is a real problem	20 (53%)	12 (32%)	3 (8%)	3 (8%)	0 (0%)
Q7. Course friends help me in times of stress	11 (29%)	20 (53%)	4 (11%)	3 (8%)	0 (0%)
Q8. I am enjoying the challenge of university study	5 (13%)	22 (58%)	11 (29%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Role of the portal in developing peer support networks

The extent to which the FDT portal facilitated students making friends is unclear. The portal went live on August 24th 2009 and several students had registered and used it as early as August 26th 2009, illustrating early signs of enthusiasm. By the start of term (21st September 2009) 47% of students had registered, but only 28% of members had uploaded posts to the forum. These figures may not give a true indication of the engagement with the forum; a more detailed analysis showed viewings to be more extensive. For example a single topic entitled: What would you like to do during induction week? received a total of 319 views and 53 separate posts. This indicates that more students were reading (and re-reading posts) than were actually posting.

Postings covered a variety of issues, both social and academic, including induction week, accommodation, practicalities of moving to Manchester, timetabling and programme related issues.

Generally, postings used friendly, informal language and were written in text speech (but were still legible) for example:

So excited bout sat guys!! Woop Woop. Arriving at 3 @ Wilmslow Park. Anyone else??? Cant wait to meet you all guys.

Users clearly felt that the forum provided a safe and friendly environment and were comfortable enough to use informal language in their postings. It was also apparent that, as intended, the portal was enabling some of the students to make friends and begin to interact socially before arriving at university.

Deployment of a third year student mentor to facilitate the forum (Issue 2) initially appeared to be ineffective as their first post received only 3 replies. However, closer analysis revealed that the post was actually viewed 108 times, suggesting that although interested, new students were reluctant to engage in discussion. As the focus groups in phase 1 had suggested that the experience of current students would be of interest to incoming students this was surprising. The reasons for this are unclear but it is notable that the mentor had no previous experience of this role and on at least one occasion took 6 days to reply to a question. With hindsight the mentor may have needed greater support and advice on how to facilitate the forum.

Impact on emotions and expectations

After two weeks study, the students seem generally unaware of any emotional impact of coming to university with just 13% considering it an emotional time (Table 2, Phase 3, Q9). However, the phase 4 survey (6 weeks into the course) shows a rise in reported negative emotions and a general decline in positive emotions compared to the phase 2 survey (cf. Figure 1 with Figure 4). Of particular note is a big rise (1% to 30%) in the number of students reporting feelings of stress. This is not a surprising finding as there is a growing belief that becoming a university student is essentially an emotional process (Christie et al. 2008).

Closer inspection of responses to the phase 3 and 4 surveys indicates a divergence in student's expectations and their experiences between the surveys. After the phase 3 survey the course appears to be in line with student expectations. Only 16% report that workloads are higher than expected (Table 2, Phase 3, Q6), 80% are enjoying new and interesting ways of working (Table 2, Phase 3, Q7) and 93% are happy to work independently (Table 2, Phase 3, Q8). However, six weeks into the course, despite 72% reporting that they are enjoying the challenge of university study (Table 2, Phase 4, Q9), 72% are experiencing higher than expected workloads (Table 2, Phase 4, Q2), 68% have concerns about their time management (Table 2, Phase 4, Q4), 68% anticipated more help from tutors (Table 2, Phase 4, Q6) and only 26% are finding the course to be exactly as expected (Table 2, Phase 4, Q3). Furthermore, 85% of students are experiencing financial pressure at this point (Table 2, Phase 4, Q7). It would appear that the realities of studying on the course (i.e. a developing miss-match between expectation and experience) combined with mounting financial pressure are leading to increased stress for the students and an erosion of positive emotions.

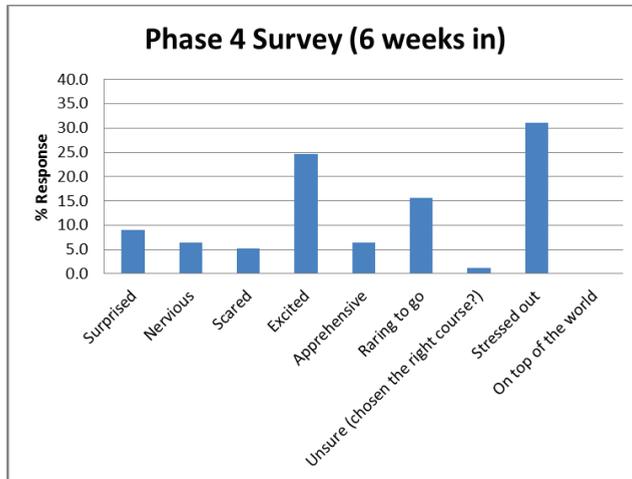


Figure 84. Phase 4 Survey Q1: Level 4 student's feelings about coming to university after 6 weeks of study

This observation raises concerns as research findings from Brissette et al. 2002 and Johnson 1994 found that high levels of stress are strongly associated with early departure from higher education. However, the same research suggests that optimism influences improved psychological well being and aids in better adjustment as a result of coping strategies used during times of stress. Despite the high number of students reporting feelings of negativity and high stress levels an equally high level of responders reported still being optimistic about their study (Figure 4).

Role of the portal in managing expectations

It was hoped that the FDT portal would be useful in managing student expectations and help them to understand the requirement of their course. Interestingly, the phase 3 survey elicited mixed responses about the students' use of the portal to prepare for university. 80% said that visiting links on the portal had helped them to understand the course better (Table 2, Phase 3, Q5). However, while 38% of respondents indicated that they wished that they had used the portal more to prepare, 41% disagreed and 21% reported being unsure (Table 2, Phase 3, Q10). According to findings within the Higher Education Academy report (2006), support provision is not always utilized to its full advantage. The students who most need it are not necessarily the ones that will use it. Furthermore, some literature suggests that characteristically, students at this stage of their development tend to overestimate their knowledge, abilities and understanding (Drew 1998). Consequently, students so early into their study may not recognise the value of a support facility such as the FDT portal and are consequently still surprised by the realities of study at HE level.

Engagement with tutors

An important aspect of Art and Design led courses is the fact that students depend upon the guidance of their tutors, which is particularly important given the ambiguous nature of Art and Design pedagogy (Ewings 2008). Developing effective working

relationships between students and their tutors is therefore essential. After two weeks 77% of students report that meeting the year tutor via the portal made the first day less daunting (Table 2, Phase 3, Q3) and 77% felt that they could ask tutors questions when they were stuck (Table 2, Phase 3, Q4). However, after 6 weeks 68% expected to receive more help from tutors (Table 2, Phase 4, Q6). Although good tutor/student relationships had been established this provides further evidence that some students were unprepared for the levels of autonomy expected of them at HE level. Further analysis reiterates this thinking; at six weeks into the course attendance was found to be 17% lower than for the previous year's cohort (2008/09). This was evident despite significant additional early support being available on the FDT portal.

Phase 5: summative evaluation of the student transition

51% of the cohort completed the final questionnaire survey. 83% of respondents confirmed receipt of an invitation to visit the FDT portal and 57% reported that they used it in preparation for coming to university. Unfortunately, 17% of students indicated that they either did not receive, or were unsure if they had received, an invitation. Some non-users of the portal reported struggling to gain access and not understanding how to use it and feeling disadvantaged by this. Evidently some work is required on the administration to ensure that all the students receive an invitation and that these include clear instructions on the use of the portal.

Those students who did use the portal reported that it had helped them to get to know other students and to realise that others had the same feelings and concerns about starting at university. Furthermore, being able to see work from current students was reassuring to them:

Viewing current students work and the chat room to at least see some of the other students who would be on my course, even if I didn't actually have the courage to speak to them yet.

The opportunity to interact with the year tutor was also valued by users of the portal:

The portal was very helpful as Julie [level 4 year tutor] was willing to answer all our queries concerning the course.

Analysis of the site activity log showed that use of the portal continued after the initial induction week throughout the first term. Responses to open questions suggest that this aided the development of students study skills and awareness of course expectations and closed question responses revealed that:

92% agreed they knew what would be expected of them in terms of attendance.

88% agreed they knew how to follow timetables.

76% agreed when asked if they understood the various teaching methods used to deliver the course.

96% agreed in knowing how to make the most out of taught sessions.

Poor attendance was however a feature of the rest of the term down from 83% for the 2008/09 cohort to 66% in 2009/10. Given the link between low attendance (and poor general time management skills) and the likelihood of withdrawal from study

(Johnson 1994 Fitzgibbon and Prior 2003) this was concerning and suggests that the implementation of the FDT portal has not impacted positively upon student engagement or autonomy. However, by the end of the first term retention on the programme was 100%. Based on the evaluation findings it is suggested that the FDT portal has facilitated the development of support networks and valuable coping mechanisms, relatively quickly. In this respect the induction process appears to have worked effectively in buffering the highly stressful and emotional process of transition to university at least during the first term. The final retention rate for the academic year was 77%, slightly up from 75% in 2008/09. Although this is a slight improvement there is still a need to improve retention and further investigation of the withdrawal themes and the student experience during the second term is now required.

Conclusions

A key finding of this project is that student expectations and experiences of university life appear to diverge at some point between two weeks and six weeks into their first term. The causes of this are undoubtedly multi-faceted. A significant emotional shift occurred over this period as feelings of optimism and excitement faded and levels of stress increased and despite best efforts in managing expectations, explaining approaches to teaching, learning and assessment and providing examples of work via the portal, many students were still unprepared for the levels of independence and autonomy expected of them. This seems to have directly impacted upon engagement and attendance.

The key transitional student interest is making new friends. The FDT portal facilitated development of social and academic support networks that have mitigated emotional and expectation issues and appears to have impacted positively on overall retention to the programme.

Future developments to the FDT portal and induction process must aim to build on the emotional wellbeing and optimism that is prevalent in new students. To do this, mechanisms must be put in place providing emotional support for students when they are at their most vulnerable (between 2 weeks and 6 weeks into the course). Furthermore, we must recognise that current approaches do not prepare students for the independent and autonomous learning expected of them. Simply explaining what is expected is not effective and we need to revisit our current approaches to learning skills development.

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