The Value Paradox – inducting undergraduate university students in a time of austerity

Tim Jones, Penney Upton & Dean J. Wilkinson

The challenges facing UK higher education are both well documented and controversial; however, pitted against this context is the requirement for psychology departments to provide an increasingly rich and diverse university experience for students, whilst ensuring progression and retention remain central to undergraduate provision. Despite the recognition that induction is of upmost importance in ensuring a successful transition from pre-tertiary to higher education, many universities are faced with changing budgets in the post-Browne era (Browne, 2010) across all aspects of academic life. Such a challenge presents departments with a unique paradox since student expectations continue to rise as the dominance of consumerism reaches fruition, whilst budgets continue to decrease. In acknowledging the importance of induction for both the overall student experience and for retention, the University of Worcester designed and successfully implemented an induction programme on a considerably reduced budget. A satisfaction questionnaire was completed by 136 undergraduate students inducted in 2011 and the results compared to those of 87 students from 2010 (where the induction budget was considerably higher). The results indicate similar levels of satisfaction and engagement with induction activities and whilst an off-site activity remains key to the success of induction, such an activity doesn't have to present considerable expense. This paper provides an overview of designing an induction programme on a reduced budget, presents satisfaction results from undergraduate students who completed induction in both 2010 and 2011, and presents suggestions for best practice in the design of induction events for psychology undergraduates.

WHILST UK higher education institutions are continually shrouded in uncertainty following the Browne report (2010), the shifting socio-political landscape residing in the shadows continues to make strategic planning increasingly difficult. The changes in educational policy at times lack transparency or are implemented without extensive consultation, forcing universities to adopt a reactive rather than proactive stance. Despite the Chancellor publicly declaring 'Universities are jewels in our economic crown' (Osborne, 2010), he matched his admiration for universities by *rewarding* them with a 40 per cent (£2.9bn) reduction in their teaching budget whilst colleagues lifted the cap on the number of AAB students that could be recruited. Previously, UK universities were individually limited in the number of students that could be recruited, and whilst in the main this remains, for those students achieving three A-level examination passes at grades AAB, this limit was lifted. Additionally, Willets (2010) stated that the reforms would enable 'choice and power in the hands of students' whilst leaving others, for example, Sir Steve Smith (Vice-Chancellor, University of Exeter) referring to this group of students as 'gold dust'. The net result was unpredictability both in terms of student numbers and departmental budgets. The true paradox of the economic situation, however, lies with the mantra 'do more for less', since many university departments are faced with decreasing resource budgets whilst tasked with increasing the student experience, most notably and publicly via improvements in National Student Survey scores and Key Information Set (KIS) data. This alone makes for a relatively grim revised landscape, although at the centre of all the changes and uncertainty are those students about to embark on their chosen university

programme. Students may have selected their university based on a range of criteria including course content, assessment modes, employability prospects, distance from home, course cost and accommodation availability amongst others, but are arguably unaware of the stark challenges facing the university they have joined.

The reduction of operating budgets is particularly significant for new students since the transition between pre-tertiary and higher education is both a period of personal investment and one of considerable social displacement (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012). Further, many students experience a dichotomy between their expectation of higher education and the presented reality during the first year of study (Smith & Hopkins, 2005), which may intensify difficulties in adapting to university life. Successful student transition is not only of importance to the individual concerned but is of equal importance to universities since transition is at the core of student retention and progression (Tinto, 1987). The non-completion of level four students is approximated across universities at 17 per cent (Christie et al., 2004), and whilst the reasons for such attrition may be multi-faceted and frequently individualistic in nature, some general and common themes can be observed. Previous research suggests that students may hold unrealistic expectations about what university or the teaching experience (Sander et al., 2000) will entail, making the transition period more difficult. Additionally, mature students, those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those who are first-generation students may require significantly more support in adapting to university life (Johnson & Watson, 2004; Yorke & Thomas, 2003; Clerehan, 2003). The issues of expectation and learner identity are particularly important since some students are ill-prepared to begin study at higher education due to a lack of understanding about how university study differs from pre-tertiary study, and are subsequently required to reorganise themselves as independent learners.

Significant attrition places an additional economic pressure on universities through the further reduction of operating capital, therefore highlighting the symbiotic relationship between student and university.

The process of transition from pre-tertiary to higher education frequently relies on the induction process; ordinarily a set period of time where students are introduced to core course-level information, university policies and procedures, relationship building (staff and peers), orientation activities and forward planning. The process of induction is not only important to help manage student expectations and the realignment of learning styles into one of an individual learner, but to also provide community development through the sense of belonging to either a university or course-level community, and foster a view of the university as a supportive and nurturing environment (Edward, 2003).

Although many universities would argue that they aid the process of transition via their induction programmes, research argues that students experience a burden of information on arrival (Briggs et al., 2012), and adjustment to university life remains a daunting experience despite carefully planned induction programmes (Hassanien & Barber, 2007). Many universities structure their induction programmes around the provision of information rather than relationship building. Furthermore, few universities focus on expectation management and community development despite the key role they play in helping students move successfully into higher education. In recognising the importance of fostering a distinctive course-culture, Upton, Taylor and Upton (2009) argue that induction should include a combination of traditional information delivery sessions and an off-site activity day where students and staff work together in fostering a sense of course community, and in turn help to develop a sense that universities are supportive environments (Edward, 2003). In redesigning the psychology induction programme at the

University of Worcester, Upton et al. (2009) introduced an activity-based day at an outward bound centre where staff and students were divided into teams to work on problem solving and team-building activities. The activity afforded students the opportunity to build relationships with each other and staff, and helped to foster a sense of course-community. Of the 87 students who completed evaluative questionnaires, 90 per cent rated the event as enjoyable and 94 per cent agreed that the event provided an opportunity to build relationships. Despite such promising results, a dichotomy existed in the building of staff-student relationships, since 62 per cent of staff agreed that the event enabled them to get to know students better, whilst only 28 per cent of students agreed that the event provided an opportunity to build relationships with departmental staff. Further, 49 per cent of respondents agreed that the event had made them feel more at ease about starting university. Although predominantly positive the results indicated that further refinements could be made to both the event and the induction programme overall. Further, the event was relatively costly and during planning for the 2011 induction programme the departmental induction budget was substantially and significantly reduced.

Psychology Induction 2011

Whilst recognising the importance of an induction event that moved induction out of the lecture theatre and away from information provision to a practical, team-based activity, where staff and students worked together to help foster relationships and breakdown barriers, there was also the requirement to reduce the overall cost of induction. Further, to help better prepare students for study at level four it was decided that the induction event should include an activity reflective of a modular assessment mode, and to provide early-formative feedback on performance. The role of formative feedback in higher education has been extensively documented and is widely acknowledged to promote student learning (Jones, 2009), provide educators with an early indication of student performance (Boston, 2002) and is directly linked to student retention (Yorke, 2001). Formative assessment can aid student learning through helping students to consolidate and reflect on their learning, identify gaps in their knowledge, and encourage the identification of transferable skills (Bangert-Drowns, Kulick & Morgan, 1991). The identification and reflection of skills was seen as particularly important for Worcester psychology undergraduates since throughout introductory modules at level four, students are encouraged to identify and reflect on their developing skill set to help aid future employability prospects. The alignment of a successful induction event and the development of reflection skills were perceived by the course team as of particular importance. The induction event was also seen as an opportune time to help reduce anxiety and integrate those students (e.g. mature students and first-generation students) who traditionally require more initial support (Johnson & Watson, 2004; Clerehan, 2003). Finally, since induction should move beyond simple information gathering and is arguably best delivered as an active rather than passive process, an event was required that afforded orientation and exposure to both the teaching styles adopted in higher education and the physical environment. The aims of the revised induction event were:

1. Foster a sense of a supportive learning community where students and staff alike work together;
2. Provide exposure to higher-education teaching styles, learning environments and to assessment modes adopted at level four;
3. Provide early-formative feedback and develop reflective skills;
4. Integrate students from across the cohort to help better support students with additional requirements;
5. Support the orientation to the physical environment.

'Life without TomTom'

In order to achieve the aims and deliver the event within a substantially reduced budget an event entitled 'Life without TomTom' was devised. The event introduced students to how individuals learn and navigate novel routes based on the cognitive mapping work of Tolman (1948). Students were introduced to this area since cognitive mapping doesn't form part of the A-level syllabus and provided a novel way into introducing research methodology and critical thinking as part of the induction process. During a short presentation, students were informed about how cognitive maps develop (Lynch, 1960), gender differences between map accuracy and features (Tlauka et al., 2005), and how maps are measured (Appleyard, 1970; Thorndyke & Hayes-Roth, 1982). Following the presentation students were separated into groups of six and provided with Google Map walking instructions for one of 10 set destinations. Each destination was 10 to 15 minutes in walking duration, included at least one Worcester landmark, and was city-centre based. Students were asked to walk the route twice in each direction (waking the route for a total of four times) and then return to the city-centre based base-room where they were asked to individually draw their cognitive map. Students who were already familiar with Worcester were placed into a separate group since their maps should arguably be more accurate than those students who were unfamiliar with the local environment and would provide a further discussion point for the subsequent part of the activity.

After drawing the sketch-map students were asked to consider how they would assess the accuracy of their maps, who in the group had the most accurate map, whether they could identify Lynch's (1960) features on their sketch maps and whether any gender differences existed. The initial part of the activity afforded students the opportunity to become familiar with a region of the local environment whilst fostering the development of interpersonal relationships. Since students were assigned to groups by department staff this prevented students from working in pre-existing friendship groups. The second part of the activity encouraged students to discuss research and built confidence in using 'psychological language' introduced during the introductory lecture (which in turn had exposed students to one of the teaching styles adopted in higher education), and to discuss ideas of measurement and accuracy as a group.

The final part of the activity was the production of a research-poster based on a provided template to help display how accuracy was assessed, provide background information to the project and display the methodology adopted throughout the TomTom project. The template is the same as the template used in several level four assessments, therefore providing students with early exposure to one of the assessment modes and the materials available. To help students with background information two articles were provided, but each group only received one article and was encouraged to share resources to further foster communication skills, and to help manage expectations regarding the availability of resources. Each group was also provided with the poster-marking criteria implemented at level four and asked to consider their poster against the criteria. Importantly, whilst students were working on the posters department staff circulated between groups discussing the project, the background literature and the importance of reading academic articles in addition to core course texts, and provided details on reading strategies. The latter part of the event was designed to help foster a relationship between staff and students and to provide an example of the structure of seminar sessions at level four.

The event embedded skill development across a number of areas and students were asked to think about the skills they had developed or strengthened as part of the induction event during the reflective process. The activity had actively encouraged

relationship formation, communication, problem solving skills, and encouraged level four students to think about research in real-world settings whilst being active participants.

In assessing the event, 136 students completed a short questionnaire based on the questionnaire devised by Upton et al. (2009), with 95 per cent agreeing (strongly agree or agree) that the event was enjoyable and 98 per cent agreeing that the event provided an opportunity to build relationships. Further, there was a substantial improvement in relationship building with staff in the department, with 62 per cent of students agreeing that the event provided an opportunity to get to know staff and 69 per cent agreeing that the event had made them feel more comfortable about starting university. The ability to provide early-formative feedback was also positively received with students commenting that they were more assured that the criteria were transparent and that they had already had an opportunity to practise an assessment mode.

Concluding remarks

Although the paradoxical relationship between funding and enhancing the student experience remains, combined with the importance of inducting new students into higher education to best prepare them for future study, manage their expectations and foster a learning community, this article and the revised induction programme at the University of Worcester demonstrate that induction doesn't have to be an expensive process. It should certainly be a process whereby the student is central to the aims and outcomes and managing the transition from pre-tertiary to higher education is conducted in an active way whereby students are partners on the educational journey rather than customers. Induction events should also embed a range of communication and presentation skills, alongside orien-

tation and confidence building to best support students ahead of their forthcoming programme. The real importance of induction, however, is two-fold; successful induction facilitates transition and in turn reduces attrition, and through this increase in retention and achievement, increased (student) satisfaction and funding may follow. Naturally, there is a need to inform students of procedural systems and university policies and introduce students to learning resources and wider university support mechanisms, although when and where these occur is a contentious issue. Induction weeks are traditionally dogged by overloading students with information through passive talks rather than involving students as active partners in seeking information. If information provision is required ahead of programme commencement, then arguably students should be involved in seeking the most pertinent information with the remaining information left to infiltrate throughout the academic year. Certainly, Briggs et al. (2010), suggest that induction should occur over a prolonged period ranging from one semester to an entire academic year to help prevent information overload and feelings of a non-supportive and didactic environment. Despite the paradox, sometimes more can be done with less.

The Authors
Tim Jones, Penney Upton &
Dean J. Wilkinson
Psychological Sciences,
University of Worcester.

Correspondence
Dr Tim Jones
Psychological Sciences,
University of Worcester,
Bredon,
Henwick Grove,
Worcester, WR2 6AJ.
Email: t.jones@worc.ac.uk

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