Evaluation of the practice and effectiveness of University College London's transition programme

Dr. Marco Angelini, Educational Liaison, University College London[1]

Introduction

In this presentation I will illustrate and discuss the results of an evaluation exercise relating to the experience of new first-years in the academic session 2006-07, whilst placing it in the context of the implementation and roll out of UCL's Transition Programme (TP) from its inception and piloting in 2005. UCL is a highly ranked multi-faculty university with an international reputation, and is one of few pre-1992[2] higher education institutions in the United Kingdom to run a unified and comprehensive Transition Programme that aims to support all new undergraduate learners; it is housed in the institution's Widening Participation Unit, and is focused on supporting student achievement and retention through peer mentoring, information/discussion activities and study skills workshops, including a significant provision of web-based support, including electronic discussion fora and information/learning resources available through www.ucl.ac.uk/transition. These activities take place primarily during the first academic term, as it is generally understood that effective transition support has more impact in the first six weeks of a course of study; an insight that is supported through research in different contexts.[3] UCL's TP was initially modelled on the 'Faculty 101' programme at the University of Melbourne, and was introduced by one of their staff on secondment to UCL in 2005; three teaching programmes were identified as a pilot for the programme: Chemistry, Natural Sciences and Archaeology.

Background

The programme is set to be rolled out to all the university's undergraduate departments by 2009 as one of the features of its 'Access agreement', a government-sponsored policy which aims to widen participation in higher education. UCLs Transition Board, which has operational oversight of the programme, receives reports on the TP from the project officer; the Board in turn reports to Academic Committee, the senior institutional body responsible for academic affairs.
Departments with a full Transition Programme run a mentoring scheme with experienced students in the same teaching area who receive training and support throughout, as well as workshops on study skills, time-management and academic writing. It also promotes events and discussion about social and practical issues that

---

[1] Additional research by Dr Anne Samson, independent consultant.
[2] British polytechnic institutions were made universities in 1992, ending the so-called 'binary' university system.
[3] For a selection of research projects in this area that would support such a view, see D. Young (Ed.). The First Year Experience in Continuing Education, Higher Education Academy, 2007

'Evaluation of the practice and effectiveness of University College London's Transition Programme.'
Refereed Paper
Dr Marco Angelini

1

affect students, ranging from accommodation and finance to jobs and socialising: this happens through talks, ice-breakers, university tours and virtual discussion forums. Transition is now embedded in 12 departments and teaching programs across 6 faculties and schools at UCL, reaching up to 634 students; from 07/08 this will increase to 25 departments in total, reaching approximately 1000 learners. Feedback about this year's programme was collected from 178 first-years in the form of questionnaires, and informal group feedback sessions were conducted with mentors; these represent the main data-set for this evaluation. The questionnaire requested answers in a mixture of formats, including binary and open response, Likert-scale value ratings and prompted options. This data has been contextualised firstly through some comments on the institutional background of the implementation of the programme, and secondly with a set of statistics on retention and progression at UCL showing the possible impact of transition practices for new undergraduates in the pilot areas. Future evaluation will include data from more participating departments as it becomes available, as well as for specific groups with non traditional profiles allowing for comparison differentiated by socio-economic categories, gender and ethnicity.

Needs Identification

The programme seeks to develop existing departmental activities beyond the traditional introductory and information activities characteristic of British university inductions. Retention is a significant concern for universities, carrying funding and wider implications for institutional success; at UCL, where retention figures are historically high, there are nonetheless significant variations between departments and teaching programmes that could be addressed. As well as benefiting all new UCL learners the Transition Programme supports the university's Access strategy by providing an additional layer of support for learners from historically less included backgrounds, who may thus be at greater risk of early withdrawal. Research from a variety of sources in first-year experience and transition studies clearly shows a positive link between more involved support activities and increased retention and achievement rates for all groups of learners.[4] Moreover, work in Australian and American contexts especially, has shown that rates of progression into year two are significantly affected by support activities that specifically target groups of learners from non-traditional backgrounds.[5] It is intended that this study should find a place within the evidence base in this area and contribute to a developing understanding of the impact of support activities on different groups of new undergraduates.

Implementation

Twelve departments and teaching programmes went forward with a TP for the academic year 06/07, having recruited and trained mentors and set appropriate dates for the TP. The table below shows the breakdown of student numbers and mentors per department and teaching programme. The Natural Sciences and Chemistry TP includes single-session workshops scheduled through term 1 around topics such as

---

[4] For example, see Davies, P. and Parry, G. (1993) Recognising Access. The Formation and Implementation of the National Framework for the Recognition of Access Courses, NIACE.
[5] For example, see Cameron, A and Tesoriero F (2002), Adjusting Institutional Practices to Support Diverse Student Groups. The Inaugural Pacific Rim - First Year in Higher Education Conference: Dealing with Diversity. QUT, 14-16 July 2004.

'Evaluation of the practice and effectiveness of University College London's Transition Programme.'
Refereed Paper
Dr Marco Angelini

2

plagiarism, study skills, lab skills and careers. The Archaeology TP includes weekly sessions on study skills, writing skills, field work and careers.

Department		First Year Students	Mentors
CHEMISTRY		106	10
ARCHAEOLOGY		70	10
NATURAL SCIENCES		55	8
NEUROSCIENCE		19	2
BIOLOGYOF FERTILITY		5	1
PHYSIOLOGY		120	10
PHARMACOLOGY		18	2
FRENCH		35	5
LANGUAGE AND CULTURE		14	1
SOCIAL SCIENCES (SSEES)		70	5
SPANISH AND LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES		26	3
ARCHITECTURE		96	14
	Total First Year (FY) students:	**634**	
	Total mentors:		**71**

The procedure for training and inducting mentors/mentees includes: refresher sessions for established mentors, 2 hour training sessions for new mentors, briefing introduction to new undergraduates during induction, longer information session to new students on TP, mentor allocation over lunch. This process has been followed, with minor variations, for all participating departments.

Evaluation

In discussing evaluation results that are partial, and at the early stages of implementation, care should be taken not to draw conclusions too hastily; in particular, whilst retention is a key aim of transition work, as well as an important determinant in its success, a broad range of circumstances come into play in a student's decision to interrupt their studies, many of which are out of the control of departments and UCL. Departments should aim to create a positive culture around the first-year experience that will, in time, lead to measurable successful outcomes in terms of retention, progression and achievement. The overall tenor of comments from the first years was very positive, and there are representative comments listed below in order of frequency. An area of interest for the programme is in the feedback on the provision of workshops, where many students commented on the need to run them at more accessible times. There is a direct comparison to be drawn between data from the two cohorts in Chemistry and Natural Sciences for which we have feedback on one of the Likert-scale questions (on the extent to which the programme helped to achieve different aims). No firm conclusions should be drawn from this, however, as the sample size is small and cohorts differ widely from one year to the next, irrespective of any influence from the support programme itself. With far more data becoming available at the start of the next academic session, comparison will become more reliable; there will be 3 cohorts worth of comparison to be had from the pilot TPs as well as data from 9 other departments and teaching programmes. Many comments

'Evaluation of the practice and effectiveness of University College London's Transition Programme.'
Refereed Paper
Dr Marco Angelini

3

were collected from participating mentors during departmental feedback sessions as well as from the virtual discussion fora; the mentors were strongly supportive of the values and principles behind the programme and many felt the experience had been beneficial not only for the mentors, but had been valuable for their own personal and academic development. Some commented that they appreciated the opportunity to take more responsibility in their departments.

Evaluation of Questionnaire Responses

The summary and brief comments below relate to the evaluation responses of first year students from the 12 departments and teaching programmes participating in Transition activities in term 1. The questionnaire required a mixture of open and closed responses, including a Likert-scale question on which aspects of mentoring were most successful (value range 1-5), multiple response questions concerning motivations for attending/not attending, and open text questions. It was delivered at the end of the first term by mentors, the project officer and departmental staff, according to the size of the department and other practical considerations. Whilst the summary attendance table below refers solely to mentoring sessions, the other categories of response refer to the programme as a whole. (The questionnaire is attached at Appendix A).

Comparative Departmental Feedback

Summary attendance for mentoring sessions

Degree of Attendance	Individual Responses	%
All	57	32
Some	98	55
None	23	13
Total respondents	**178**	
Total 1st years	**634**	

Feedback summary

-92% would recommend the programme to others
-87% attended all or some sessions
-28% evaluation questionnaire response rate

Main reasons for not attending sessions:

- Time not suitable
- Not compulsory

Benefits of attending and expectations:

Fairly evenly distributed overall between 'meeting new people', 'having someone to talk to' and 'finding out about what is expected'. The exception was the Transition workshops which were not seen as a major benefit. The 'Expectations/Aspirations

'Evaluation of the practice and effectiveness of University College London's Transition Programme.'
Refereed Paper
Dr Marco Angelini

4

met' responses below show the most frequent responses in order of scale. The tables immediately below show a comparison between the data for the two years available for Chemistry and Natural Sciences; for comparability, the data has been aggregated for both years as these teaching programmes ran a unified TP in both years in question and evaluations were conducted in common, whilst in the second year the evaluation exercise differentiated between the experience of the two cohorts. The scale used is 1-5 with 5 as the most favourable value. They show broadly comparable values though there is a noticeably more positive response in the second year for the last 2 options. As a whole, the scores for both years were interpreted as disappointingly low; this is a reflection of a general feeling amongst the Natural Sciences students (brought out clearly in the comment sections of the feedback in year 2 of the programme), especially, that their programme was more relevant to Chemistry students; the ratings from the former students appeared to significantly depress the overall scores.

Data for 2005-2006	Chemistry/ Natural Sciences
Meet other students	2.5
Establish links with mentors	2.7
What's expected of me and from the department	3.4
Develop new skills	3.3
Total respondents	37

Data for 2006-2007	Chemistry/ Natural Sciences
Meet other students	2.5
Establish links with mentors	2.4
What's expected of me and from the department	3.7
Develop new skills	3.6
Total respondents	50

Expectations/Aspirations most successfully met (in descending order):

1. Knowing expectations of department
2. Developing Skills
3. Meeting mentors
4. Getting to know other students

Preliminary Retention Data

Department	First year % interruption, 01/02-02/03	First year % interruption, 02/03-03/04	First year % interruption, 03/04-04/05	First year % interruption, 04/05-05/06	First year % interruption, 05/06-06/07
Archaeology	7.9	8.8	1.6	7.1	8.5
Chemistry	9.5	12.3	12.7	16.7	10.4
Natural Sciences	9.5	0.0	0.0	28.6	7.1

'Evaluation of the practice and effectiveness of University College London's Transition Programme.'
Refereed Paper
Dr Marco Angelini

5

These figures indicate the percentage of first year students in each 'pilot' department that did not progress from first year into the second year of study. The key year to note is 05/06-06/07, which is the benchmark figure representing the first cohort of students who began in September 2005 progressing from first to second year who experienced the TP. In the case of Chemistry and Natural Sciences there is a significant improvement in retention rates, though in the case of the latter the figures are somewhat skewed due to changes in the status of this teaching programme over the years for which we have data. In the case of Archaeology, there appears to be no noticeable trend.

Feedback from the 'parent' TP in Melbourne has shown that a programme of this sort can take 5 years to become fully embedded. The data here can only indicate early trends amongst a relatively small group of students, and is therefore anecdotal in terms of an overall judgement on the effectiveness of the programme; there is a measurable comparison for three separate programmes (the pilots in Archaeology, Chemistry and Natural Sciences), and more significant data will be available once retention data comes in for all the existing 12 programmes into the next academic session.

Recommendations

Following a positive response from Faculty and further departmental meetings, the expansion of Transition provision into the next session is set to grow in line with predicted targets. From the current 12 departments/teaching programmes that run a Transition Programme (TP), it is expected that 25 full TPs will run in 07/08. It is intended that individual TPs will include use of a virtual discussion forum, peer mentoring and at least 2 Transition Workshops. On the basis of feedback and planning meetings with existing and future programme co-ordinators, the workshop provision has been refined in line with student feedback and evaluation of departmental needs. In addition, it has been proposed to extend the scope of Transition to information and skills activities with year 12/13 learners in schools and colleges, marrying with objectives in UCL's Widening Participation strategy. There is an emerging consensus that a gap is widening between the expectations and academic skills of pre-university entrants and the work and academic culture of UCL; the objectives of the Transition Workshops and proposed outreach Transition work in particular are to address this perceived need, through activities that are designed to address the realities of study in higher education.

Transition Workshops

Planning is underway for the development of three Transition Workshops to be offered as templates for learner support, designed in differing formats and scales to address particular needs and aims. To be delivered ideally in the first 4 weeks of term one.

a) Academic Writing: in collaboration with staff at UCL's Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT), a small group (15-20) workshop on academic literacy, essay writing (including planning) and research skills. Delivered by post-graduate students linked to CALT.

'Evaluation of the practice and effectiveness of University College London's Transition Programme.'
Refereed Paper
Dr Marco Angelini

6

b) Study Skills: two sessions that can be delivered to larger groups up to 50. To include work on critical thinking, time management, avoiding plagiarism and academic study skills. To be delivered by the TP project officer in the first instance, in collaboration with departmental academic staff and mentors. To include small group work led by mentors working with first years. Activities in the second session based on content delivered in the first session; for example: building an effective argument, use of evidence, planning projects and assignments.

c) Life and Social issues: large session containing mini-talks on 'What You Need To Know': accommodation, finance, health issues; followed by 'What You Can do': volunteering, clubs and societies, UCL Student Union. Run jointly with the Union and delivered by staff in those specific service areas.

Transition Diaries

Planning is underway in collaboration with staff in the publications unit for the production of academic diaries to be made available to all UCL first years from the next academic session. As well as performing the diary function this resource will contain information on useful contacts and dates, UCL accommodation, student finances and other student support services. It will take the form of a ring-bound A5-sized diary and will be distributed during induction.

Outreach Activities

It has been agreed to explore the possibility of developing a set of Transition/outreach activities with individual institutions that deliver appropriate university entrance qualifications. Such a strategy is intended to support the part of UCL's Access agenda (Pre-enrolment Study Support Scheme) that seeks to develop support activities for pre-university learners from WP backgrounds, as well as the transition goal of narrowing the skills and expectations gap that exists between pre-university applicants and new undergraduates. A need has been identified for linked activities that could enhance progression and aspiration-raising, providing a support route for learners that goes beyond one-off progression activities. In addition, this might provide enhanced opportunities for evaluation with learners over a period of time, in order to further gauge the effectiveness of such activities. A draft programme of activities linked with Further Education colleges (community-based tertiary institutions) has been developed under the moniker "Universities Link".

Expansion of TP in 07/08

Roll-out of the programme in the next session will include, along with the existing TPs, the following departments/teaching programmes: Dutch, SSEES Languages, SSEES History, Scandinavian Studies, Civil Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Science and Technology Studies, Spanish and Latin American Studies, Biology, Computer Science, Earth Science, Geography.

'Evaluation of the practice and effectiveness of University College London's Transition Programme.'
Refereed Paper
Dr Marco Angelini

7

Transition Program 2006/07
Student Evaluation

Thank you for sharing your thoughts on the Transition Program. Your feedback will help us improve the program in future.

1.   Your department and degree program:

_____

2. Who was your mentor?

_____

3.   Did you attend meetings of your mentor group? (please tick)

◯ All meetings   ◯ Some   ◯ None

4.   If you attended **none of the meetings**, what were your reasons?
         (please tick all that apply)

◯ Meeting times did not suit me   ◯ Meetings were not compulsory
◯ I did not feel the need for a mentor
◯ Other (please explain)

_____

5. If you went to initial meetings **but stopped attending**, what were your reasons?
     (please tick all that apply)
◯ Meeting times did not suit me
◯ I felt I no longer needed a mentor
◯ Meetings were not compulsory
◯ I did not get along with my group
◯ I did not get along with my mentor
◯ Other (please explain)

_____

6.   If you attended **any meetings**,
         what do you think were the
         benefits of attending?
◯ Getting to know other first year
   students
◯ Having a later year student to talk
   to
◯ Talking about the transition
   workshops
◯ Discussing first year in general
◯ Other (please explain)

'Evaluation of the practice and effectiveness of University College London's Transition Programme.'
Refereed Paper
Dr Marco Angelini

8

7.   Do you have any suggestions for how mentoring could be improved?

_____

_____

_____

8.   What did you hope to gain by participating in the Transition Program? (please tick all that apply)

O Meet other first year students

O Establish links with student mentors in my department

O Find out what is expected of me and what I can expect from the department

O Develop new skills for successful, university-level study

O Other (please explain)

_____

9.   To what extent do you feel the program has helped you achieve these?

Meet other first year students	Not at all				To a great extent
	1	2	3	4	5
Establish links with student mentors in my department	Not at all				To a great extent
	1	2	3	4	5
Find out what is expected of me and what I can expect from the department	Not at all				To a great extent
	1	2	3	4	5
Develop new skills for successful, university-level study	Not at all				To a great extent
	1	2	3	4	5

10.   Would you recommend the Transition Program to future first year students?

        O Yes   O No

Why or why not?

_____

_____

_____

11.   Is there any further support you would have liked to receive to help you settle in at UCL?

_____

_____

_____

12. Do you have any further comments you wish to add?

_____

_____

_____

'Evaluation of the practice and effectiveness of University College London's Transition Programme.'
Refereed Paper
Dr Marco Angelini

9

References

Davies, P. and Parry, G. (1993), Recognising Access. The Formation and Implementation of the National Framework for the Recognition of Access Courses, *NIACE*, 1993.

Cameron, A and Tesoriero F (2002), Adjusting Institutional Practices to Support Diverse student Groups. *The Inaugural Pacific Rim - First Year in Higher Education Conference: Dealing with Diversity.* Queensland University of Technology in conjunction with Monash University, Melbourne, 14-16 July 2004.

D. Young (2002), (Ed.), The First Year Experience in Continuing Education, *Higher Education Academy*, 2007

'Evaluation of the practice and effectiveness of University College London's Transition Programme.'
Refereed Paper
Dr Marco Angelini

10