Creating a First Year Experience

Orna Farrell – orna.farrell@dbs.ie

Dublin Business School – School of Arts

Dr James Brunton – james.brunton@dcu.ie

Dublin City University

Abstract

Retaining students and supporting transition to Higher Education are key issues facing many Higher Education institutions. The recent study on progression in Irish Higher Education conducted by the HEA found that an average of 15% of new undergraduate entrants failed to progress into the second year of their programme. (HEA, 2010). In Dublin Business School, a private higher education institution, retention and progression of first year undergraduate Arts students was highlighted as an area of concern. In response to this, we identified two areas which could address retention and progression of first year undergraduates: induction & creating a first year experience.

Our approach was informed by research from the fields of Education, for example research conducted by Cuseo (2002) on the roots of attrition and Tinto's (1987) US based research which concluded that "students who do not feel that they belong both academically and socially are likely to leave", and the fields of Social/Organisational Psychology and Identity Studies. Finally the University of Ulster's Student Transition and Retention project provided us with concrete guidelines for changing induction and our approach to first year students to promote student success. This paper will outline how we introduced a first year approach designed to improve retention and progression and ease the transition to higher education for first year undergraduate Arts students in Dublin Business School. Our first year approach included an enhanced induction, a student mentor system, increased student academic and personal support**.**

Introduction

This paper reports on a process of changing new student induction, in an Irish third level college. The changes that were made were grounded in the existing literature and research of a number of different

fields and had a number of goals: to create a student-focused process; to create a positive impression of the college; to reduce the anxiety of new students; to facilitate socialisation; to inform students of their rights and responsibilities; introduce students to the academic and organisational skills needed to succeed in third level education; and, most importantly, to support the student in their transition to higher education. These goals became the focus of the project because the existing research and literature indicates that this focus will facilitate successful socialisation in, and identification with, the new context into which the students are entering, and specifically from an educational perspective, that retention and student success can be improved.

Literature Review

The fields of Education, Social/Organisational Psychology and Identity Studies overlap in many ways regarding what they say about the socialisation of entrants into a new context, but there is little communication between these fields. This project utilised, and integrated, the existing literature and research in these areas in order to more fully inform the new induction process.

Literature Review - Education Literature

The roots of attrition

Research in the area of retention focuses on two areas: the reasons why students leave early and how to improve retention in Higher Education, the first year of college is identified in all the literature as the most critical period for student attrition in all higher education institutions. Education based research into the area of transition and retention originates from the work of Vincent Tinto which began in the 1970s in the USA. Interest in the student 'departure puzzle' in the US began as high non-completion rates of nearly 50% negatively affected enrolments, budgeting and the public perception of the quality of American Higher Education. (Yorke & Longden, 2004, p. 89)

Tinto's interactionalist theory from 1975 argues that four major factors influence the process of student retention: the student's interaction with the institution, the individual characteristics of the student, commitment to the goal of graduation and social integration into college life.

Tinto has refined these ideas over the years; his 1987 Theory of Student Integration is the most widely accepted model of student transition. It identifies "Five conditions stand out as supportive of student learning and retention, namely expectations, support, feedback, involvement, and relevant learning." (Tinto, N.D.) Fundamentally for Tinto, college should focus on education not retention. Tinto's ideas on

student retention and how universities can promote student success have been very influential and have been built upon by Mantz Yorke, Cueso and Cook & Rushton from the University of Ulster STAR project.

Joe Cueso's work on the roots of attrition examines the complex personal, academic, institutional and motivational causes of student attrition. "Cueso (2002) identified nine causes for students leaving higher education early.

They are:

- Academic under preparedness

- Academic boredom

- Difficulties managing the transition to Higher Education

- Uncertainties about the long term goals

- Perceived irrelevance of the curriculum

- Social isolation

- Mismatch between student expectations and early experiences

- Low commitment to persist

- Finance" (Cook & Rushton, 2009, p. 2)

Cueso nine factors are based on the American experience of attrition, however research carried out in the UK, South Africa, Australia and Ireland identify similar factors for student non-progression.

In the UK, concern about financial cost of non-completion to the public finances brought the issue of undergraduate attrition onto the agenda. A study conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England estimated that the cost of non-completion in England for 1995-96 was about £90 million. (Yorke & Longden, 2004, p. 11) This prompted two large scale studies into undergraduate non-completion in the UK, the first conducted by Mantz Yorke (1999) and the second by Davies and Elias (2003).

Table 1. Influences on full-time students and sandwich students early departure from their programmes. (Yorke & Longden, 2004, p. 106)

Yorke (1999)	Davies and Elias (2003)
• Wrong choice of field of study • Academic difficulties • Financial problems • Poor quality of student experience • Unhappiness with the social environment • Dissatisfaction with institutional provision	• Wrong choice of course • Financial problems • Personal problems • Academic difficulties • Wrong choice of course

These UK studies mirror the American research. The recent study on progression in Irish Higher Education conducted by the HEA (2010) which used statistical data from 38,000 first year higher education students for the years 2007/2008. The approach of this study differs from the above studies, rather than trying to explain why students leave, it examines the characteristics of students who don't progress. Key findings include:

- 15% of new undergraduate entrants failed to progress into the second year of their programme
- Non-progression is much higher at level 6/7 at 25%
- There is a clear link between prior educational attainment and successful progression
- Students are significantly more likely to be present the following year the more advanced they are in their course of study
- Students with lower Leaving Certificate examination points are less likely to progress (HEA, 2010)

Throughout all the literature, one common theme emerges; that the first year of undergraduate study is the most critical time for retaining students, if students persist into the second year of study they are very likely to graduate.

Promoting student success

As first year is the critical time for student attrition, educationalists such as Tinto and Yorke take the view that "institutions are likely to maximise their students' chances of success if they pay particular attention to the first year experience." (Yorke & Longden, 2004, p. 136) Creating a positive first year experience

which promotes student success and improves student retention which addresses the roots of attrition has created a variety of approaches, case studies, guidelines, elearning solutions, mentoring programmes and induction programmes. For the purposes of this study two approaches informed our project, Mantz Yorke's guideline for promoting student success and the University of Ulster's Student Transition and Retention (STAR) project provided us with concrete guidelines for changing induction and shaping our approach to first year students.

Yorke's guidelines for promoting student success address the multi-faceted causes of student attrition by considering what institutions can do, what students can do and what the higher education system can do. Key components are information and advice pre-entry, adopting a welcoming approach, having an effective induction, socialization, supportive environment for learning including assessment and programme structures, clear expectations, value teaching, support academic transition to HE, encourage and develop learner autonomy. Yorke's guidelines deal with academic and social readiness a swell as the institutional response to first years. (Yorke & Longden, 2004, p.140)

The University of Ulster's Student Transition And Retention (STAR) project coordinated by Tony Cook and Brian Rushton produced *The Guidelines for the Management of Student Transition.* These guidelines provided us with concrete steps to redesign induction and transition in Dublin Business School. Cook & Rushton drew upon the research of Tinto and in particular Cueso's nine reasons why student leave and aim to develop good practice to aid student transition. (STAR, 2005)

Literature Review – Social/Organisational Psychology and Identity Studies

Through the process of socialising an individual into a specific context the individual may acquire the attitudes, behaviour and knowledge needed to participate as a functioning member of that context (Bauer, Morison and Callister, 1998; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). As an individual creates a new identity, for example a new student identity, they are susceptible to influence due to the uncertainty regarding what the new context may require of them (Ashforth and Saks, 1996).

The socialisation practices utilised in the context will have an impact on how the individual creates their new identity (Saks and Ashforth, 1997; Van Maanen and Schein 1979), for example whether tactics involving a structured program of socialisation, or tactics that indicate a relative absence of structure during the socialisation process, are utilised (Ashforth and Saks, 1996; Cable and Parsons, 2001). The context influences the socialisation process through the organisation and management of how those within the context are grouped together. The size, type and demographic diversity of a group, along with the organisation and management of roles within the context, will all impact on how the entrant

experiences the socialisation process (Saks and Ashforth, 1997). The socialisation process ensures the continued survival of the context, along with its central values and norms, because of the way entrants are provided with a framework for understanding the new context and responding to events and the people around them (Bauer, Morrison and Callister, 1998; Cote and Levine, 2002). If the socialisation process can cause the entrant to create their new identity such that it becomes aligned with the central values of that context then it is more likely that they will be committed to remaining in that context (Cable and Parsons, 2001). Individuals will also be more likely to follow through on their commitments in the new context if they have had to demonstrate that commitment actively rather than passively (Cioffi and Garner, 1996). If possible the context must also facilitate the new entrant in creating a clear view of how the new context plays a role in who they are going to be in the future, as without a view of how one will be in the future one's sense of coherence and continuity as 'a person' will be compromised. This has been shown to have adverse affects on the individual (Orbach, Mikulincer, Stein and Cohen, 1998, Baumeister, 1990).

If an individual's expectations regarding the context are not met during socialisation, perhaps because the expectations were unrealistic, the new entrant will experience dissonance. This may result in the individual deciding to leave this new context (Louis, 1980), which may result in the goals of the individual and the context remaining unfulfilled. New entrant expectations can be unrealistic due to the inflated nature of many organizational recruiting practices (Ward and Athos, 1972, cited in Louis, 1980), or due to the expectations being based on stereotyped or ill-informed knowledge of the new context. The amount of knowledge or experience the individual has with the type of context they are entering will also influence the accuracy of their expectations (Cable and Parsons, 2001).

Early experiences have a powerful affect on an entrant's perceptions of, and responses to, a new context. These early perceptions have been found to remain stable for up to a year later (Bauer and Green, 1994). New entrants often experience disorientation, a sense of foreignness and a kind of sensory overload when entering a new and possibly unfamiliar context (Louis, 1980; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). This experience has been referred to as reality shock (Hughes, 1958, cited in Louis, 1980), entry stress (Wanous, 1992) and surprise (Louis, 1980). If the entrant perceives a difference between their own values and their perceptions of the central values of the context this will cause dissonance, as "the norms for success are counter to their personal assumptions" (Cable and Parsons, 2001, pp. 3). Dissonance may cause the entrant to choose the option of leaving the new context, choose to renegotiate the terms of their being in that context, or at least attempt to, or choose to accept the new context, even if it is different to how they thought it would be (Louis, 1980).

If an entrant engages in self-management or self regulation while engaging in identity-work during their early socialisation, they will experience less anxiety and stress than those who do not (Lindner & Harris, 1993; Saks and Ashforth, 1996; Winne, 1995; Zimmerman, 1994; Zimmerman, 2002). Self-management/self-regulation techniques include self-observation, self-goal-settings, self-reward, rehearsal and self-punishment. Other techniques include focusing on self-efficacy and self-goals, strategy use, time management, self-judgment, self-reaction, environmental structuring; and help seeking (Zimmerman, 1994; 1998; 2002). Individuals with more sophisticated beliefs about the nature of knowledge and learning, and who believe in their own ability to learn, are more likely to utilise productive strategies (Paulsen and Feldman, 2007). Importantly, these beliefs and strategies may be learned from others within the new context (Schunk and Zimmerman, 1997). Indeed, the sense of compatibility between the individual and the context may be increased if relationships are built with more senior context-members, for example with lecturers, tutors or similar in an educational context (Kim et al, 2005). General socialising can also aid entrants in their building of positive social networks, which in turn aids those entrants in feeling that they are part of the new context (Bauer and Green, 1998).

If the individual cannot, or does not, implement a coping strategy to deal with entry shock, the cognitive dissonance will not be reduced or eliminated, resulting in continued psychological discomfort on the part of the individual. This may cause them to leave as a way of eliminating this state of tension. If the individual remains it is likely that inappropriate and dysfunctional interpretations of other people and events within the context may occur (Louis, 1980). It is only if the individual does manage to deal with entry shock in an effective way that they can go on to 'learn the ropes' of the context and become a successful, functional member of that context.

Entrants, who progress beyond initial difficulties, without deciding to leave that context, may then learn the ropes and develop a more stable identity. They may attain a clearer sense of themselves in the new context, a sense of their role(s) and what is expected of them as they move beyond the immediate effects of the early socialisation process. They may then look to other emergent desires for new challenges, growth or friendships (Katz, 1980, cited in Ashforth and Saks, 1996). In this way they move from being a peripheral participant to being a central participant, as they increase their level of identification with and the amount of influence they have within, that context (Campbell-Clark, 2000; Lave and Wegner, 1991). This allows the individual to normalise their participation in that context, in order that they can have a coherent and consistent identity. By stabilising their sense of themselves they have rendered "the new, the unexpected, the strange, and the frightening more or less ordinary" (Ashforth et al, 2000; Ashforth, 2001, pp. 18). The normalisation process is made easier by others providing positive feedback for the individual's

new way of being, and therefore socially validating their new identity. Normalisation is likely to occur if: the individual is immersed in the context, as it becomes a social cocoon that dominates time, action and psychological processes while the individual is in that context, and possibly outside of that context as well; and if the individual is inclined to become involved and immersed in the local reality and gain acceptance from others (Ashforth, 2001).

Redesigning Induction

The Existing Approach to Induction

The existing induction/socialisation process was process orientated, fitting in with an efficient registration schedule, and consequently was limited to approximately an hour in duration. While some important induction/socialisation activities took place the limited time did not allow for many other potential activities. There was also a period of time for most students, when they moved from their registration room to their induction room, and had to wait until the rest of that student group had registered before the induction could begin. This 'quiet time' was perceived by the academic staff as having a detrimental effects on the students during the subsequent induction.

Organisation and Staff Buy-in

Piloting of small number of new induction strategies and activities began on two undergraduate programmes in October 2009 and across all undergraduate programmes in the School of Arts for the January 2010, part-time student induction. In order to carry out the January 2010 pilot it had to be authorised by the Head of the School of Arts and agreed to by all the School of Arts Programme Leaders. Buy-in was also needed from the academic staff involved in the induction. Additional organisational buy-in was not necessary at this point as this pilot was still operating within the existing registration and induction schedule. Some of the academic staff were not entirely convinced about the utility of some of the induction activities, especially in terms of how the new students would react to them. The pilot was successful both in terms of student reaction to the induction activities (as indicated by completed feedback forms) and positive feedback from staff. Between January 2010 and October 2010 planning and preparations for a new day-long student induction process, and separate from the registration process, were progressed. In order for this to go ahead, given that buy-in had been received from the staff within the School of Arts, initial authorisation was required from the Academic Director. Once this was obtained several meetings took place between the organisers of the induction and different groups in the

organisation: the senior management group; student services; library staff; IT staff; the Director of Marketing; and the administrative team responsible for the organisation of the registration schedule. Buy-in was obtained but was not easily won as the different groups required assurances regarding the viability and utility of the proposed induction processes: that the new induction would not impact, detrimentally, on the registration schedule; that it would be practically possible for staff from student services, the library and IT to support the induction at an already busy time of the academic year; and that the new induction processes were knowledge-based and effective. Once buy-in was obtained from these groups it was decided that the new induction processes be extended to the Business and Law Schools, which then necessitated further meetings and collaboration with staff member from those Schools.

The New Induction

The new induction was designed for first year full-time and part-time undergraduate Schools of Arts students (n294) studying on level 6, 7 and 8 courses. Full-time students are mainly school leavers and most part-time students are mature/non-traditional. Full-time induction was a two day event, the first day comprised of registration and a short welcome and the second day was a full day of induction activities. The part-time induction was shorter version due to time constraints.

Our new induction was shaped by the STAR guidelines for induction:

- Induction activities should familiarise students with the local area, the campus and its support services
- Induction activities should highlight students' academic obligations and the obligations of the staff to the students
- Induction activities should support the development of those independent study habits suitable for higher education.
- Induction events should provide the foundations for social interactions between students and the development of communities of practice
- Induction activities should promote the development of good communication between staff and students (STAR, 2005)

In table 2. the induction activities we used, the rationale for inclusion and their link to the literature are outlined.

Table 2. New induction activities and corresponding rationale and supporting

New Induction		
Activity	**Rationale**	**Supporting theory**
Welcome talk -**commit sheet**	• Break the ice • Link the present to a desired, positive future and prescribe norms for their future student-identity • Reduce fears and anxiety caused by entry shock • Facilitate an active commitment	Education • Tinto (1987) • Yorke (2004) Social/Organisational Psychology & Identity Studies • Louis (1980), Van Maanen and Schein, 1979, Wanous, 1992 – reducing entry shock • Cioffi and Garner (1996) – making an active commitment • Orbach, Mikulincer, Stein and Cohen, 1998, Baumeister, 1990 – facilitate the creation of a coherent future identity
Team building	• Encourage socialisation between learners (both with immediate peer group and existing learners within the organisation who can act as mentors • Encourage socialisation between learners and programme team staff	Education • Tinto (1987) Social/Organisational Psychology & Identity Studies • Kim et al, 2005 – building relationships between new entrants and more senior context members • Bauer and Green, 1998 – general socialising • Saks and Ashforth, 1997 – management of roles during socialisation

Study skills
   -**mind mapping**
   -**self-assessment questionnaire**
   -**assessment**
   -**checklist**
	• Provide learners with a positive set of expectations that the organisation has for them
	 • Make learners aware that there are tools they need to have in order to succeed in their education goals
		Education
		 • Cook & Rushton (2009)
		 • Yorke (2004)
		 • Cueso
		
		 Social/Organisational Psychology & Identity Studies
		 • Paulsen and Feldman, 2007, Schunk and

	• Begin to facilitate the learners in their development of those tools	Zimmerman, 1997 – sophisticated beliefs about knowledge and learning
Library, careers & student services	• Encourage learners to use college services and resources from early on. • Introduce and familiarise learners with the wide variety of college services and resources available to them	• Cook & Rushton (2009)
Meet mentors	• Encourage socialisation between learners • Provide positive role models for learners to emulate • Provide opportunity for peer support	Education • Cueso Social/Organisational Psychology & Identity Studies • Kim et al, 2005 – building relationships between new entrants and more senior context members • Bauer and Green, 1998 – general socialising • Saks and Ashforth, 1997 – management of roles during socialisation
Scavenger hunt	• Physical orientation of campus • Team building • Encourage socialisation between learners	Education • Cook & Rushton (2009) Social/Organisational Psychology & Identity Studies • Bauer and Green, 1998 – general socialising • Saks and Ashforth, 1997 – management of roles during socialisation
Expectations activity	• Provide learners with a positive set of expectations that the organisation has for them • Reduce fear and anxiety	Education • Yorke (2004) Social/Organisational Psychology & Identity Studies • Paulsen and Feldman, 2007, Schunk and Zimmerman, 1997 –

		sophisticated beliefs about knowledge and learning • Louis (1980), Van Maanen and Schein, 1979, Wanous, 1992 – reducing entry shock
Social event	• Encourage socialisation between learners • Encourage socialisation between learners and programme team staff	Education • Cook & Rushton (2009) Social/Organisational Psychology & Identity Studies • Kim et al, 2005 – building relationships between new entrants and more senior context members • Bauer and Green, 1998 – general socialising

The First Year Experience

Introducing a new induction process alone is not sufficient to improve student retention. "Research examining induction practices and student retention highlights the first semester as a critical period for students with many students being unprepared for the experience" (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1997: Yorke, 1999 cited in STAR)

Promoting student success involves a cultural change toward first years which involves learning and teaching approaches, assessment methods, feedback, student support and programme structure. With this in mind we wanted to create a first year experience which approached retention holistically, linking induction to the first week academic and social activities and to a credit bearing academic support module "The learning lab". The following supports were introduced for new first years throughout the academic year:

- Peer mentoring
- Library tours
- Essay writing, exam & study skills workshops
- Credit bearing academic support in every first year module-"learning labs"
- Specific first year staff support- Level 1 Manager
- First year socials: stress management technique

Feedback on the New Induction

This section will present some of the feedback gathered from both students and staff who were involved in the new induction activities.

Student feedback

A questionnaire consisting of 10 questions using a five point likert scale where 1= strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. The questionnaire was administered on the day of induction.

New Full time 1st years (n=199)

- 96.98% strongly agree/agree that induction staff were approachable
- 92.46% strongly agree/agree that induction was informative
- 77.39% strongly agree/agree that induction fulfilled their expectations
- 80.41% strongly agree/agree got to know other learners during induction
- 78.89% strongly agree/agree that induction eased my anxieties and fears about starting my course
- 90.46 strongly agree/agree that they are familiar with my rights and responsibilities as a learner in Dublin Business School

New Part Time 1st Years (n=95)

- 97.92% strongly agree/agree that induction staff were approachable
- 92.84% strongly agree/agree that induction was informative
- 90.62% strongly agree/agree that induction fulfilled their expectations
- 86.46% strongly agree/agree got to know other learners during induction
- 91.66% strongly agree/agree that induction eased my anxieties and fears about starting my course
- 90.63% strongly agree/agree that they are familiar with my rights and responsibilities as a learner in Dublin Business School

Staff feedback

- "I would just like to say that I thought the induction process was excellent, and so far beyond my expectations for a first time run!"
- "I couldn't believe the amount of interaction the students were involved in, and they seemed to enjoy the mix of events, including meeting the mentors and the scavenger hunt."
- "The mentors were terrific- I think they got loads out of it too. Much better than the previous model :-)"

- "I thought everything ran great last week. It was a great opportunity for students to make friends and interact with their group before term began. Great work – well done."

Ongoing Research Study

Feedback questionnaires were completed by all students who took part in the induction process, which provided some initial data that could be used to reflect on the new induction process. A follow up research study was designed to collect more in-depth data from School of Arts students who took part in the new induction. This research study utilised a data-led, interpretative method of inquiry. The research adopts a phenomenological and idiographic approach, in that the research focuses on the subjective experiences of the participants, and not on the exploration of an objective 'reality', and that individual case studies were the unit of analysis. This research is data-driven, and not structured by prior theory, to the extent that the content of this research is informed by, and had a strong grounding in, existing literature, but any results or theoretical model produced by this research emerge from the analysis of the data. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with ten new students. This data has been transcribed and is currently being analysed using thematic analysis.

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