

Pre-course opportunities for social work degree students' (Renamed as 'Getting Started')

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Course details	
Course title	Getting Started
Level	Pre-registration to level 1
Year	Pre-registration to first year
Module title	Getting Started
Discipline/Subject areas	Social Work

Activity details (total approx. 500 words)	
What I did	I set up access to a restricted area on the institutional virtual learning environment (Blackboard) for all potential first year Social Work students, in receipt of an offer of a place at the university (whether conditional or unconditional), prior to their enrolment.
Why I did it	A significant proportion of Social Work applicants were arriving from non-traditional backgrounds. Often mature, these students had varying experiences from a variety of backgrounds, many having been out of formal education for some time. Enrolment week was traditionally hectic and it could be a challenge to absorb all the new information given out. It was apparent that teaching often began with some new students still feeling disorientated and needing more time to settle into their new environment. Staff in the department recognised the need for resources designed to aid the transition into higher education; a situation also identified by the HEA report into the first year students experience* (<i>see reference below</i>) which pointed to lack of preparation for academic study as one of the reasons for withdrawal. Developing an online area where students could access information, communicate with staff, existing students and new potential students like themselves, seemed an effective, economic and sustainable answer.
What I wanted to achieve	I wanted to help allay fears and increase confidence through provision of a forum linking staff and students, to introduce academic study skills at an early stage and generally help students feel better prepared for their higher education experience.
A short description of what I did	Initially the project involved an online learning area containing information about higher education and a discussion forum. During the pilot year, a selection of Social Work students, who were in receipt of an offer of a place to study at the university, were sent a letter of invitation; those who wanted to take part were asked to make contact whereupon they were manually enrolled onto the virtual learning environment (VLE). This first

	<p>pilot was highly praised by staff and students, but its expansion was limited by the manual nature of the processes. To overcome this, I established a multi-disciplinary team to look at linking admissions, registry and online services. This resulted in an automated system whereby students meeting set criteria were directly enrolled onto the VLE with their own unique on-line status. As they accepted their offers and were then enrolled their status changed accordingly. In 2008 the project expanded to include 'Snapshot: an introduction to academic practice' which is a website looking at academic thinking, reading, writing and taking notes. The project also included input from the Student Union, Disability Support and the Admission Office.</p>
<p>What worked well</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students became familiar with the VLE and the discussion forum which took some pressure off induction week. • Students found it invaluable to speak to others about their worries; in particular when finance was causing concerns, the forum gave an opportunity for the sharing of information and advice. • The forum was also a source of practical information about public transport and car parking facilities, plus making active arrangements for car sharing. • Contacts are made and friendships established before the first week of Semester 1.
<p>Problems and/or issues</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential access to licensed digital data on the VLE was avoided through construction of a separate entry point. • Failure to login e.g. when status changed was managed through amending the post-login page appropriately. • Initial invitation to the project was by letter; this has proved successful but a reliable electronic system would be an improvement for later stages • At the present time the project is centrally run by a small team and has proved to be a model of good practice; any expansion outside of the Social Work Department would require additional resourcing.
<p>What students thought about it</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quotes below are taken directly from the 2009 project evaluation: • 'I believe this is a fantastic way to get new students ready with all the facilities and advice needed at a click of a button, made me feel at ease with starting my course, and the discussion forums were particularly useful as I feel I know some of the other students before I even start.' • 'The timetable was published before induction week which was very useful as it took out the worry of knowing where I should be and when. It was very organised and reduced fears about joining university.' • 'It was good to speak to others about your worries.' • 'It is a great project, I hope this project will continue for the future students. It did help me to prepare myself and made me feel relax.'
<p>Key messages</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both staff and students value opportunities for virtual

	<p>transition resources and contact.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involving existing students as forum moderators provides a 'student-owned' voice which comes from experience and is a unique reassurance. • Successful transition support requires a multi-disciplinary approach as automating the systems allows for better tracking and expansion facilities. • Changing student demographics reinforces the need for including preparation for higher education as part of the learning experience
Related documents or links	Yorke, M and Longden, B (2008) <i>The first year experience of Higher Education in the UK: final report</i> , York, Higher Education Academy
Any other comments	<p>'From the perspective of academic staff in the social work teaching team, it was evident that students who had participated in the project arrived in induction week with additional confidence. Despite sending out the usual documentation, including maps and writing information covering all of these issues, it is clear that people valued the opportunity to ask questions about their specific anxieties and needs.'</p> <p><i>Karin Crawford; Principal Teaching Fellow.</i></p> <p>'The idea of contacting students prior to enrolment is not new – the interesting part of this project is the way in which we've done it. The key to success was getting all the right people in the same room at the same time to work out a way in which our systems could work together to achieve the desired outcome.'</p> <p><i>Andy Hagyard; Learning and Teaching Coordinator.</i></p>

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