The Forgotten Year?
Tackling the Second Year Slump

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Contents

Acknowledgements ____________________________________________ 3
Executive summary ____________________________________________ 3
Background ___________________________________________________ 4
Aims and objectives ____________________________________________ 6
Methodology __________________________________________________ 7
Implementation ______________________________________________ 11
Outputs and findings __________________________________________ 14
Outcomes ____________________________________________________ 18
Conclusions __________________________________________________ 23
Implications __________________________________________________ 24
Recommendations ____________________________________________ 24
References ___________________________________________________ 25
Appendices____________________________________________________ 27

Key words for report

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Executive summary

The project constitutes a first attempt in the UK Higher Education (HE) to investigate the 2nd year experience and issues associated with it.

Aims/objectives

The primary aims of the project were to:
1) characterise patterns of the 2nd year students’ performance
2) establish factors that contribute to any disengagement and underperformance
3) undertake meaningful interventions with potential for adoption in wider institutional policies and practices and for national dissemination.

A further intention of the project was to develop a community of practice, within the university and then nationally, of academics and support staff interested in maximising opportunities for 2nd year students and in helping them to successfully negotiate the challenges of the ‘middle year’. The project also aimed to explore international linkages and establish connections with others interested in this topic.

Overall approach

The project took a distinctive approach to exploring this under-researched topic, drawing on a range of existing institutional data sets to create a comprehensive picture the 2nd year experience. Detailed performance records, cohort satisfaction data, attendance data, various forms of quantitative and qualitative student feedback, Student Union statistics, records of Student Services’ uptake and other data sets were accessed and analysed by the project team.

This quantitative profile of the 2nd year was followed by qualitative exploration. A ‘close up’ research stage explored the perspectives of academics, support staff and students. Experiences of teaching, supporting and
‘living’ the second year were collected and analysed. Psychological characteristics of the cohort were investigated to obtain insights into reasons for disengagement and underperformance and to inform subsequent pedagogic interventions.

Findings

The project findings indicated that the 2nd year is a period where many students experience motivational and goal setting difficulties which can manifest themselves in a number of ways, including underperformance and withdrawal. We found comprehensive evidence that multiple factors contribute to this slump. The project also demonstrated that the 2nd year is a pivotal stage in the student life cycle, and that academic and support staff need to be sensitive to a complex range of issues that students may face in their 2nd year.

As our research developed, the focus of the project shifted from its initial, largely performance-oriented focus, to student experience and psychology related discourse, with particular attention to the individual characteristics and dispositions of learners as main contributors to challenges experienced in the 2nd year.

Achievements

Main project achievements include:
- A better understanding of performance patterns of 2nd year students
- The eliciting of key factors contributing to student underperformance and disengagement
- Evidence of the importance of psychological dimensions and changes in these dimensions between levels of study.
- Research findings have been used to inform practical interventions, for example, student-led curriculum change, engagement of students in research, enhancing second year induction
- Raising of institutional awareness of second year slump and embedding of curriculum initiatives in Faculties (e.g. dedicated 2nd year induction, tailored personal tutoring support)
- Raising of sector-wide awareness, with the project becoming the hub for an emerging national community of practice
- The project’s emphasis on institutional data analysis has established LJMU’s position as an active member of an international scholarly community interested in HE institutional research
- Innovative research methodologies developed through the project (e.g. automated semantic analysis of large textual data sets) have been adopted by the wider institution and attracted national interest. Two projects commissioned by the HEA were/are utilising this methodology.
- The outcomes of the project have been published in international academic journals, and widely disseminated at conferences, and a book proposal ‘Stepping up to the Second Year at University: Academic, Psychological and Social Dimensions’ has been accepted for publication in the SRHE/Routledge book series ‘Research into Higher Education’.

Conclusions and implications

The innovative nature of this inquiry meant that it has been a truly dynamic research journey. The exploration of the topic is still ongoing as we continue to discover the presence or absence of relationships between various elements of the student experience.

Background

Institutional background
In 2009-2010 the decision was taken at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) to move from a 12 to 24 credit module structure. In order to assess the potential impact of this change on student performance, student record data were analysed at the institutional level. Whilst there was no significant difference in relation to module credit size or semester structure, in the entire analysis one persistent pattern remained. Student performance as judged by marks, was noticeably lower in the second year in comparison with first and final year.

In parallel with this work, managers at LJMU asked why it was that only around 46 per cent of graduates achieved a ‘good honours degree’ (first class or upper second class honours at bachelor’s level) whereas in similar institutions the percentage was higher. The question prompted an examination of student record data in order to determine whether it might offer some clues. An initial analysis of some 7000 module results from students graduating in 2008 revealed that undergraduate student performance across the institution had dipped in the second year of study. It had been found that in their 2nd year, only 32 per cent of students had achieved grades that could be categorised as being compatible with the level of a ‘good honours degree’, compared to 36 percent in their first year and 46 percent in their third and final year.

A whole range of questions that followed indicated a need for a thorough investigation of the phenomenon and, subsequently, research informed practical interventions. The NTFS project scheme was a perfect fit for this type of investigation in terms of time scale and resources to undertake the study.

Literature

The initial exploration of the literature demonstrated that phenomenon of the second year underperformance or ‘Sophomore Slump’ attracted scholarly attention in the USA more than four decades ago and continues to be an actively, although unsystematically, researched topic (e.g. Freedman, 1956; Furr and Gannoway, 1982; Pattengale and Schreiner, 2000; Graunke and Woosley, 2005; Gump, 2007).

It has been recognised that second-year students have high levels of need and appeared less satisfied than other undergraduate cohorts (Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000; Graunke & Woolsey, 2005), leading some to refer to the second year as the ‘forgotten year’ (Tobolowsky 2008; Hunter et al, 2010). Research of Fisher et al demonstrated that sophomores are still in the transitional process, much more ‘inward’ focused, redefining their internal goals and being concerned with their academic self-efficacy (Fisher et al., 2011).

The topic received limited attention in the UK context. Although in England undergraduate degrees are differently structured: students more frequently undertake 3-year courses and do not have to select a major, similar observations and findings were made by a small number of scholars. For example Jacobs and Newstead, 2000 and Lieberman and Remedios, 2007, while exploring students’ motivation and goal, identified some distinctive characteristics of the second year students.

Lieberman and Remedios (2007) found, in relation to four-year degree programmes at a Scottish university, that there were drops in students’ ratings of their interest in their subject of study and their orientation towards mastery from the first year. Jacobs and Newstead (2000) had previously conducted two studies in an English university of psychology students’ motivation towards aspects of their subject. They also found a decline in the students’ perceptions of the importance of both subject-specific and generic skills over the first two years of the degree programme, but a recovery in the final year.

The literature review undertaken at the initial stage of the project indicated that the second year experience is largely under researched in the UK context – a result of an overpowering scholarly interest in the first and final year experience of a typical UK degree.

Relevance

There were several reasons that made this project particularly relevant and timely:
- In the context of high fees, academic achievements and student experience count more than before. Our project aimed to help students to fully capitalise on their time at university and to maximise their success in the final year.
- The topic (2nd year experience) was virtually unexplored in the UK, with only limited empirical evidence and scholarly work related to the second year experience found in the literature.
- It felt important and timely to draw academic and support staff attention to the wider dimensions of the second year student experience.

Aims and objectives

Initial aims

The overarching/initial project’s aim was to investigate Level 5 (the second year of study on a full time undergraduate degree) performance dip as an aspect of the student experience that has been neglected in UK research. The main objectives of the project were the following:

- To characterise the identified institutional dip in academic performance in the second year of study and determine if the phenomenon is pervasive or local (for example, specific to subject discipline(s) or to a certain demographic profile/characteristic of students)
- To investigate the causes of the Level 5 dip in performance through qualitative inquiry
- To develop strategies for enhancing student learning in the ‘forgotten year’
- To develop a transferable methodology for analysing student performance data.

The ultimate goal was to find out what prevents some 2nd year students from performing better and to use the project research findings to inform, develop and implement pedagogic interventions. It was hoped that these interventions would improve academic engagement and maximise achievements in year 2, thus contributing to better overall performance of students in the final year of the degree.

This institutional project also had the ambition of bringing national and international attention (via dissemination activities and Project Board members, active participants of the European Association of Institutional Research) to the second year experience and its enhancement.

Further aims/objectives included:

1. To contribute to developing a body of scholarly knowledge related to the ‘middle’ year of a typical UK undergraduate degree
2. To further understand the 2nd year student experience using small-scale exploratory studies within Faculties/Schools
3. To promote a more effective use of institutional data sets for informing practice and enhancement purposes.

While the main aims remained largely the same throughout the three years of the project, the dynamic and ‘eye opening’ nature of the research meant that certain avenues of inquiry that seemed important initially
2010-2013

were subsequently closed, with others opened up. The status of some of the aims and objectives changed as the research progressed.

An example of this is how Research Aim 4 on developing ‘a single ‘tried and tested’ methodology for analysing student performance data’ was modified. Different platforms (business intelligence portals) and formats of institutional data storage, varied mechanisms and constraints related to availability of institutional data and data sharing, led to our developing the more flexible approach of a ‘template for institutional research activity’ rather than a single methodological approach.

Our ‘working’ definition of slump has also changed as the project progressed. New aims and objectives, not considered initially, were introduced during the course of the project. One of these was an examination of the psychological profile of consistently slumping and non-slumping programmes. The aims of the study were to investigate the contribution of individual differences in explaining the dip in performance in the second year. The study, undertaken across Level 4 and 5, looked at a variety of psychological indicators such as stress, motivational goals, academic self-efficacy, metacognition, academic locus of control and autonomous learning. Demographics related variables (age group, gender, course, level, accommodation), and Level 4 mean mark were used in the analysis to identify the differences between various groups.

Methodology

Overall approach to the research design

The project research design included two distinctive strands. The first strand, an **institution-wide exploration of the 2nd year experience**, included determining and defining the characteristics of the slump and reasons behind it. This strand capitalised on the range of institutional data sets/sources available, with some additional qualitative and quantitative data also being collected. The second strand comprised **small scale Faculty based research projects and ‘on the ground’ interventions**.

Due to its exploratory nature the project utilised a broad variety of research methods. It applied a mixed method approach which included (to name a few) descriptive and inferential statistics, comparative analysis, automated semantic analysis, longitudinal narrative based study, action research and phenomenological inquiry. In order to address and fulfil the objectives, a series of research questions were devised and methods of data collection and strategies for analysis were aligned to these as mapped through the matrix (see Appendix 1 for more information).

Data triangulation, for example bringing together quantitative and qualitative data, or combining various qualitative data sets (e.g. staff and student perspectives) was applied at each stage of the exploration to create the most comprehensive picture possible of the second year experience and to inform decisions about further directions of the inquiry.

Methodological approaches of the institutional research

The institutional data analysis and triangulation of different data sources was a distinctive methodological approach of the project. In the UK, student record datasets are recognised as being underexploited by universities (Yorke et al. 2005) and the project had a specific mission to address this.
Figure 1. Methodological approaches to institutional data analysis

Quantitative methodologies

Descriptive statistical analysis of student performance records

Detailed student performance data sets, which include three consecutive cohorts graduating in 2009, 2010 and 2011, were prepared in collaboration with the Department of Information and Planning at LJMU. The data have been extracted from the records that the University has to maintain for submission to the Higher Education Statistics Agency. The data set comprised more than 200 variables recording student demographic profile, UCAS points/other pre-university qualifications, modules undertaken, credits gained, number of attempts and marks received for all completed modules and some others.

To identify patterns in student performance data across three years of study, in-depth descriptive statistical analysis was undertaken for each cohort. The analysis was undertaken on various levels: individual student, programme/course and institutional level. Although Faculty was initially considered as a unit of analysis, variations in Faculties' size and in subject homogeneity (some Faculties have more ‘tight’/homogeneous disciplinary make up than others) made them redundant as a unit of analysis.

Programmes with relatively low enrolments were excluded from the programme level longitudinal analysis (only programmes with 20+ students were included).

Huge variation in programme sizes, instability of the variables over the period of research due to organisational changes, skewed data (having records of only those students who successfully completed their degree) resulted in a limited use of inferential statistical tests/methods. Inferential statistics, however, have been utilised on several other occasions, for example, when exploring the strongest predictors of overall satisfaction in the NSS and in institutional ‘mirror’ NSS surveys for the 1st and 2nd years by academic year.

Cross-sectional programme performance data analysis as a proxy for longitudinal analysis

One of the methodological approaches to performance data analysis, developed by the programme team, aimed to provide a reasonable proxy for longitudinal student achievement data which takes three or four years to emerge. Cross-sectional data collected in a single year (i.e. representing a quasi-cohort based on
current year 1 and 2 students) was utilised as a proxy in this case, with the assumption that reasonably accurate and timely data would be as useful for enhancement activities as longitudinal data. An index of programme homogeneity has been computed, which may have value in interpreting analyses of student achievement at programme level.

This was a pioneering study which opened up the possibility of using records of student achievement in a time-efficient way. The research indicated that cross-sectional analysis of marks from a quasi-cohort can identify with roughly 70 per cent accuracy where a longitudinal dip might later become apparent. These findings would be useful for those with programme responsibilities, helping them to focus on areas that may need attention if student achievement is to be optimised. The use of ‘standard’ data (HESA submission) accentuates the potential transfer-value of the methodology to other institutions. See more details on the methodology in the Yorke & Zaitseva, 2013.

Descriptive statistical analysis of other quantitative data sets

In addition to longitudinal student performance data, a variety of other data sets were located and analysed. These included attendance records, VLE statistics, student satisfaction data, Student Union Advice Centre statistics, University Student Support Services records, results of the SU, NSS and ‘mirror’ of the NSS surveys. These data sets were transferred into SPSS, analysed using mainly descriptive statistics and compared, where possible. It was the first time at LJMU that multiple large scale institutional data sets were brought together to look at one specific issue.

Psychometric analysis

Psychometric analysis was an ‘emergent’ methodology, prompted by results of the qualitative investigation, where some distinctive behavioural patterns of the second year cohort were discovered. Variables chosen for this study were identified through interrogation of themes arising from the qualitative data and included stress, self-efficacy, motivational goals, metacognition and autonomous learning. Taking a post-positive approach, with an emphasis on multiple measurements, validated scales were used to compare students from consistently slumping programmes with those on consistently non-slumping programmes.

From the very beginning of the project our approaches to quantitative institutional data analysis were tested for ‘usability’ and ‘applicability’ via meetings and discussions with other Universities. The University of Bradford, critical friend of the project, and academics from Edge Hill and Kingston Universities were directly involved in discussing these issues.

Qualitative methodologies

Qualitative research, directed by the results of the quantitative studies, was used to investigate the students’ (current as well as recent graduates) experience of year two in their own words through focus groups, interviews and open text survey responses. Staff focus groups were also utilised to explore staff perception of the 2nd year as a cohort, especially in relation to students’ needs, behaviour and attitude to learning. A variety of traditional and innovative methodological approaches were applied at this stage of the research – some of them are described below.

Semantic analysis of student qualitative survey comments

As a result of engaging with large textual data sets (e.g. institution level data from student experience surveys) the project facilitated application of a new methodological approach - automated semantic analysis of the textual data.
The Leximancer software enables the instant interaction with large volumes of textual data to reveal semantic characteristics of the text and patterns in the data. It automatically identifies concepts, themes (groups of concepts), and connections between them by data mining the text, and visually represents findings as a concept map (Smith & Humphreys, 2006). Based on the assumption that a concept is characterised by words that tend to appear in conjunction with it, the software measures how relevant one word is to a set of other words (with indication of relevance presented in a separate table). Another attractive feature of the tool is its potential to identify sentiments associated with a concept. The sentiments are identified automatically by linking sentiment orientation, if available (e.g. certain adjectives, nouns or verbs indicative of positive or negative sentiment), to the concepts in the process of analysis and calculating the statistical probability of the concept being mentioned in a favourable or unfavourable context. This proved to be especially helpful for analysing survey free text comments where students make both positive and negative comments related to the same elements of their experience.

The methodology did not only allow for a more time effective and systematic approach to data interpretation, it also helped to surface critical aspects of the student experience that lay hidden between the survey questions. It also revealed themes overlooked by a traditional, researcher driven analysis (Zaitseva et al, 2013) (see more in the Outcomes Section). This methodological approach also proved to be effective in engaging staff in discussions related to the student experience and the dynamic nature of student satisfaction. The methodology has been widely used in a variety of institutional research projects and has generated interest from other HE institutions and the HEA.

**Longitudinal narrative study**

A longitudinal ‘close-up’ study of a small group of students was also undertaken to obtain insights into the student learning journeys from the very first day at university until the end of their 2nd year. This research project collected student narratives over a two year period in order to explore temporal dimensions of the individual student experience: e.g. transitions, turning points, continuity, change and how they influenced students’ emotional state and motivation to learn.

The methodology was focused on:

1) understanding the dynamics of individual student emotional experience of the university and factors that influence academic performance and motivation to study
2) identifying to what extent patterns of individual experiences differ/are similar and ‘critical’ time points that need particular attention
3) informing development of strategies for supporting students at various stages of their university life and year 2 in particular.

Research showed that academic emotions are significantly related to students’ motivation, learning strategies, cognitive resources, self-regulation and academic achievement (Pekrun et al, 2002). The narratives were aided by an ‘Academic Emotions Chart’: research participants were asked to record their emotional state on a weekly basis and indicate reasons for a particular emotion. Students brought their completed charts to the interview where their narratives were guided by their own records and recollection of events.

The interviews took place at six time points throughout students’ undergraduate study (three times a year in year 1 and 2) and explored significant encounters, events and personal experiences that contributed to an enhanced experience or drop in motivation/performance. The charts were collected by researchers after each interview and compared with other students’ charts in order to determine differences and similarities in patterns of student experiences and emotions.

**Research methodologies utilised in Faculty based projects**

Methodologies chosen by the Faculty based projects were dependant on the nature of the research and interventions. The majority were action research projects, informed by a specific Faculty context and wider
in institutional research findings which aimed to make improvements through an iterative process of intervention, evaluation and subsequent review.

One of the projects: Tackling the Sophomore Slump in the School of Law, for example, used a Critical Incident Technique in identifying 2nd year student perceptions of elements of the curriculum, with particular emphasis on induction and transition in the early part of semester one.

In this project student volunteers were requested to record their thoughts about their academic experience on digital voice recorders as they progressed through the first four weeks of the semester. Collection of data was based on Critical Incident Technique originated by Flanagan (1954): as soon as possible after an event that participants perceive as notable, significant or meaningful, they record their responses. A prompt list was provided to ensure that participants provided sufficient detail for the incident to be analysed. The recordings were downloaded each week, transcribed and analysed using a thematic approach proposed by Flanagan (1954).

Another project carried out on a second year module, compared tutor-led evidence-based module developments, with a module curriculum created using enhanced students’ involvement (Brooman, Darwent & Pimor, in review). The central methodological paradigm of this project was interpretative: as primary receivers and interpreters of the module curriculum, students provide an invaluable insight into the dynamics of knowledge presentation and their interaction with it (Harris et al., 2009). Information from student focus groups were analysed and considered alongside questionnaire responses.

Recordings were transcribed, entered into the qualitative analysis tool, NVivo, and analysed using a classic analysis strategy outlined by Kreuger & Casey (2009). After recommendations on student-led curriculum changes were developed and implemented, mean mark and pass rate from the next academic year were compared to those from the previous years. The student-led approach was found to be more effective in improving pass rate and mean marks and these have been sustained in subsequent years.

All purpose-built methodologies developed in the course of the project were published either as part of journal publications or as separate resources available on the project web-site

http://secondyearexperience.ljmu.ac.uk/

Specific issues that had to be addressed by the methodology

The project highlighted the challenges of working with longitudinal institutional data, determined by dynamic changes taking place in the institution. These challenges include data ‘discontinuity’: inconsistency of the records which makes longitudinal studies problematic due to programmes being merged, terminated, re-named etc. Faculty restructuring and major curriculum changes (e.g. move to a different credit structure) all impacted on the nature of some control variables that were found to be important during initial stages of the research.

Implementation

Leadership and management

Our intention from the outset was to operate a project management model that would lock the project into well-established research, evaluation and dissemination activity and ensure its strategic connectivity. Professor Sue Thompson, NTF, had overall responsibility as Project Director in her role as LJMU Director of Learning and Teaching until summer 2011 and later- as Emeritus Professor. The project was managed and coordinated by the University’s central academic development team (Academic Enhancement Unit). The core project management team comprised Head of Academic Practice Dr Clare Milsom, Co-ordinator for
Pedagogic Research and Dissemination Dr Martyn Stewart, Research Officer Dr Elena Zaitseva and Project Officer Margaret Williams.

A distinctive feature of the Project team was that it built on research collaboration between the University’s academic development unit and its academic planning team, with the Head of Academic Planning and Information Dr Wayne Turnbull being a core member of the project team. The project also benefitted from being able to ‘buy in’ the services of a senior data and information officer from the academic planning team to prepare data for analysis over the project’s three year funded period.

The project was particularly fortunate in securing the involvement of Professor Mantz Yorke to work with us from the outset as a member of the Project team in the role of research expert. This was invaluable in ensuring that the project was actively drawing on extensive research expertise in the student experience and in connecting the project to national and international networks concerned with institutional research.

A particular strength of our approach was that the team was able to work flexibly, with members taking leadership roles in respect of aspects of the work in which they had the greatest expertise. The research team had a shared vision, ethos and common understanding of the project aims and objectives. With the team working in close proximity, in an open plan office, research discussions took place on a daily basis and the location of the project within the central academic enhancement team meant that the project team was well placed for the timely dissemination of interim project findings. The central position of the AEU within the institutional structure enabled project findings and recommendations to be used on an ongoing basis to inform both institutional strategy for the student experience and academic development events, such as PGCert LTHe workshops and pedagogic research training. The project’s positioning within a central professional services team enabled the project team to work effectively with other professional service departments, facilitating collaboration and dissemination. The project also worked with a ‘core’ group of academic staff based in Faculties who served as important ambassadors for the project and who undertook discipline based project work.

Throughout the project the team worked with LJMU students either as co-creators of the research, in their capacity as academic placement students, or as agents for change, supporting interventions on the ground in the Faculties. Students were also employed as interns in the development and delivery of resources, in particular student-facing resources.

The project plan had initially provided for the appointment of researchers with a qualitative and quantitative focus appointed for specific and overlapping periods. Towards the end of the first year of the project’s operation, university restructuring required a re-configuration of the project team. This led to the decision to appoint one member of the research team as a fully funded project researcher. In the final year of the project a researcher with a background in psychometrics was employed and part time research posts were established in the Faculties to ensure a scholarly approach to pedagogic interventions and their evaluation. The appointment of a fully funded project research officer has worked to the advantage of the project, providing consistency and continuity in the management of project research. NTF Sue Thompson retired from the University at the end of the project’s second year but has continued in the overall role of Project Director as an Emeritus professor.

A key feature in the success of project management has been the role of Project Officer. Formal regular meeting were scheduled on a monthly basis, managed by the Project Officer and included associated project members from the faculties. Well documented meetings, action plans and financial tracking led by the Project Officer have served the project well, particularly with respect to ensuring continuity through a period of university restructuring and in supporting the reporting process to the HEA.

The establishing of a Project Steering Group chaired by the PVC (Education) was important for supporting the Project’s internal and external strategic connectivities. Membership included the Student’s Union, other
institutional NTFs and external representation through the Director of Institutional Research at the University of Amsterdam and Dean of Students, University of Bradford.

A project website was created in the first year of the project http://secondyearexperience.ljmu.ac.uk as a marketing tool and a means for recruiting project research participants and disseminating project findings. As the project has been developed, and outcomes generated, the website has been populated and expanded, forming a repository of research findings and resources.

Implementation process

The project implementation was closely aligned with the stages of the research outlined in the initial proposal and the methodologies chosen.

Institutional datasets were identified early on and links established with Faculty and Professional Service Teams. The datasets were drawn from the Faculty of Science; Academic Enhancement Unit; Student Advice and Wellbeing; Business Information and Planning; Library and Information Services; World of Work Career Centre and Liverpool Students Union. For each dataset the research team worked with academic staff or the team manager to ensure that the structure, function and ethical framework was understood. These initial contacts also contributed to raising awareness of the project and to identifying potentially interested members of staff as research participants and project ambassadors. As the project developed this network of professional colleagues was crucial to the effective implementation of interventions.

Throughout the project the role of students has been critical, they have been involved as partners, co-researchers and drivers of change. Peter Jago, a Natural Sciences’ final year student, applied to take part in the project as his placement experience. Having been trained in facilitation of focus groups, he provided an excellent input as a project researcher and a representative of the student voice. He contributed to design and resources for the Student Zone of the project web-site and analysed performance data from STEM subjects (representing several consistently slumping programmes). Peter presented his findings and a student perspective on the 2nd year experience at the 2012 LJMU Learning and Teaching Conference, where he participated in discussions alongside academic members of staff.

Students employed by the AEU in admin support roles during the course of the projects assisted with various parts of the project implementation and contributed to research with their own narratives and reflections.

Six students who volunteered to take part in the longitudinal two yearlong studies (all of them happened to be course representatives) were not only research participants, but project ambassadors, actively involved in improvement of the second year experience in their Schools/Faculties via Boards of Study, Student Voice week, and raising student awareness about possible issues they might face in the second year.

In the final year of the project a student-intern was employed to assist with project resources design and publicity – by making the project web-site compatible with various mobile devices.

Three dissemination events were held, one in each year of the project. In February 2011 a ‘launch’ workshop was held. An open invitation was issued to all LJMU staff with specific invites for recognised institutional dataset ‘holders’. Attendees were all invited to contribute to the project and further sources of data; research participants and potential faculty case studies were identified. A follow-up workshop was organised in 2012, where project interim findings were shared and plans for a university-wide call for small scale projects were discussed. A national dissemination event held in the final year was focused on reporting on the project findings/achievements and resources developed, as well as hearing from colleagues from across the sector and creating a national community of practice.

As the research deepened and matured we realised that some aspects of our initial research constructs needed redefining. Definition of the term ‘slump’ as underperformance (drop in marks) in the second year was
re-visited. Research findings suggested that phenomena could be linked to ‘over’ performance in the first year and that that slump might not be reflected in marks at all. Through work with student focus groups we also became aware of students experiencing a second year slump even if it was not reflected in their overall marks. This redirected our attention in the second year of the project from mark-based achievement to more ‘hidden’ indicators of slump, such as psychological factors.

Quantitative data appeared to be more complex and preparation and analysis more time consuming than initially envisaged. Emergent patterns in the data were not linear, reflecting the complexity of the phenomenon and multiplicity of institutional factors that played a role in changing the landscape of the data. Identification of contributory factors became challenging in this situation. We have also found that there are some discrepancies and inconsistencies in the recording of data on student performance.

In order to explore some of the ‘emerging’ research questions, new research participants such as LJMU alumni were included at later stages of the project. They were able to put their second year experience in a wider context of their development as learners and future professionals.

A stated output of the project was to provide a data analysis consultancy service. Interactions with other universities demonstrated that the role of an institutional researcher is still underdeveloped and ownership of institutional data is not defined, with various models operating in different institutions. A ‘template for institutional data analysis’ that we are currently developing will include indication of possible data ‘holders’ and allow for more flexibility – e.g. could be adapted by HEIs to reflect their individual models.

The emphasis throughout the project implementation was on making the project an institutional rather than an AEU initiative, actively including Faculty based academics and professional support services and working collaboratively at all stages of the research and intervention process. All small scale projects were evaluated, with recommendations made for further developments and transferability.

**Outputs and findings**

**Research results**

Collectively our research has demonstrated that the second year is a complicated period of the three-year undergraduate student lifecycle. It is overly simplistic to think in terms of ‘a slump’ as a single phenomenon affecting students’ grades or motivation. Rather, it is a period where students are likely to experience multiple changes, competing interests and pressures that affect them to differing degrees.

**Performance effects**

Analysis of performance profiles of whole-institution data-sets found that, across the three cohort intakes, 41-48% of completing students experienced lower grades in their second year. Whilst this represents a substantial part of student population it is by no means a universal effect. Our analyses identified that some students groups were statistically more likely to suffer lower grades in their second year, including international students and students of black or minority ethnicity.

Across the portfolio of undergraduate three-year academic programmes there were, perhaps surprisingly, no significant patterns of lower mean grades in the second year by cognate discipline. Programmes in all cognate discipline areas appeared equally vulnerable to seeing a performance dip. Few of the programmes that did demonstrate a mid-year performance dip did so in repeated years. This represents less than 4% of all programmes.

Research findings indicated that the phenomenon of a performance slump occurs mostly at the level of the individual student rather than programme, and that there is a substantial body of students at risk of underperforming. It was at this point our studies turned to examining student characteristics.
**Student characteristics**

Psychological profiles of samples of students from all three years were produced using an array of psychometric measures. Findings identified the transition into the second year as important, marking a shift in goal orientations from mastery to performance goals, confirming findings published elsewhere (Lieberman & Remedios, 2007). A statistically significant increase in maladaptive procrastination was also identified in the second year. Maladaptive procrastination is recognised as a common response to increased pressure and anxiety in assessment. Both of these findings demonstrate the increasing significance of performance pressure and anxiety into the second year of study.

**Student experiences**

At the level of the individual student, our examination of experiences and psychological measures found that drops in performance level, motivation, engagement and general wellbeing could also be attributed to individuals’ choices, values and behaviours (agency). Findings of interviews and longitudinal narratives revealed the complexity of influencing factors that contributed to challenges and anxiety in the mid year.

**Pre-university experience:**

Excessive support prior to entering University was found to be significant factor contributing to slump. Participants described how being heavily coached and given continuous feedback at school, had left them ill prepared for facing the increased expectations of independent learning encountered in the second year. In such cases the first year appears to have unprepared students for this transition from pre-university learning mode to the changing study demands in the second year.

**Student expectations:**

We examined pre-enrolment survey data and 1st year institutional survey in order to better understand the match/mismatch between students’ expectations and actual experience of the university and how it might impact on second year engagement and performance. It was apparent that a vast majority of applicants, when choosing a university, focus largely on physical (how well campus and buildings are presented) and affective (how welcomed they feel by the staff and how current students are feeling about/describing the university) domains of learning experience at the expense of the cognitive learning domain. Learning expectations, as reported by students surveyed, were rarely questioned by them or addressed by academics during open and applicant days and often remain ‘obscured’ during the 1st year of study with its frontloaded support. This might impact on some students who demonstrate lack of focus, poor understanding of requirements or overconfidence in their own abilities, which is then extended into the second year.

**Student choices, behaviours, attitudes**

Semantic analysis of the open text comments in 2nd year mirror of the NSS survey revealed that:

- 2nd years are concerned with their academic self-efficacy (‘able’ as a concept highlighted by the Leximancer analysis reflects their increased focus on ability to learn, to understand, to make good progress)
- ‘Time’ is the second important theme, reflecting multiple priorities and issues of time management that many second year students are grappling with
- Practical learning, career orientation and skills become more important for this cohort as many students are in the process of making decisions about their future career, re-affirming or reconsidering their goals
- 2nd year students become more demanding and strategic, their critical voice is much more powerful in the feedback they provide to the University. Context and sentiment direction, as indentified by the software, changed for some ‘core’ concepts – university, feedback, assessment, feel -all become unfavourable the 2nd year (Zaitseva et al, 2013).

Qualitative research included a longitudinal ‘close up’ study in which a group of students were followed from their first days at the university and a small group of alumni who recently graduated from the university.
These studies enabled a more reflective and extended examination of how student success was supported at different stages of the student lifecycle, from which experiences in the second year could be located.

Among the factors found to influence behaviours of the second years are the following:

- importance of non-academic achievements in the 2nd year (e.g. sport clubs, Students Union)
- many students have increased outside commitments, including part time work, which means they do not readily involve themselves in campus based/course related activities
- Peer influence: if some students are working hard their peers tend to follow. This can also work the other way, as roommates can become disengaged influencing each other.
- Students who dropped out after the 1st year contribute to social and often academic isolation of their close friends who moved into the second year.
- Many slumpers are ‘silent sufferers’, not necessarily sharing their problems with personal tutors or student support services until it is too late (interestingly, some male students perceived seeking help as a weakness). Family is often the main source of support and encouragement when students are making decisions about leaving or staying after the 2nd year.

Successful, highly engaged students, while reflecting on why some of their peers lose motivation and drop performance, referred to lack of maturity and focus, and belonging ‘somewhere else’, (e.g. not spending much time on campus, in the library or with peers). At the same time other research findings revealed that a sense of belonging and academic achievements are not necessarily linked. There were some students living at home with a low sense of belonging, but performing well academically.

Although the actual drop in performance and/or motivation does not affect graduate employability in a linear way (there was no direct correlation found), slumping students are more likely to miss out on the opportunities to obtain a good sandwich placements/internships. Some alumni reported a perceived low relevance of a ‘preparation for placement’ module, thus delaying their placement search/application process until too late. Eventually many slumping students end up without suitable placement experience, while others might get a ‘last minute ’deal.

Factors that promoted engagement in the second year, as indicated by students, included strong peer learning groups (often established during Foundation Degree or in the 1st year in Science and Engineering disciplines), peer mentoring schemes, part time work in moderation (helping with time management and planning ahead), sandwich year placements (especially when performance based), and an intense 1st semester with various assessment and feedback opportunities.

Perception of academic staff on second year students
Whilst student descriptions of themselves were insightful, so were the perceptions of second year students by academic staff. Academics characterised the second year cohort in a variety of ways which were often contradictory. Some described students as strategic but very anxious. Others observed that second year students are better equipped to undertake their studies, but frequently playing the system, or viewed the students as more confident in their ability to cope, but as often complaining.

Academic staff also believed that students who failed 2nd year exams and made a decision to leave were most likely to have a deeper underlying problem which originated much earlier, but that had not been shared with a personal tutor or member of the teaching team.

Effects of curriculum structure and content
Psychological indicators and students’ experiences reflect increased attention paid to performance and in some cases assessment expectation anxieties. A hypothesis was that reduced motivation and engagement with studies for some students might be a function of a more challenging curriculum in the second year, characterised by increased workload and more strict assessment.
Interviews with academic staff revealed the belief held by some that curriculum design and assessment practices might influence expectations and learning approaches of 2nd year students: 'their behaviour is partly led by our signals'.

The following curriculum and assessment related factors were identified as likely factors contributing to underperformance or lowered engagement:

- Concentrations of technical, challenging or less exciting topics placed into year 2 that resulted in lower grade profiles.
- Staffing issues, with less experienced members of staff allocated second year modules, despite this year being commonly perceived as challenging to teach.
- Pressures of performing well in the NSS, might result in year 3 students being priority for programme teams. Our research showed that the need ‘to excite and inspire’ 3rd year student resulted in more experienced and enthusiastic staff being placed on final year modules.
- Academic/personal tutor support given lower priority in year 2 despite elevated student anxieties
- Poor assessment scheduling of coursework deadlines in year 2 leading to deadline bunching and work overload for students.
- Implicit or explicit stricter marking in the 2nd year in contrast to ‘ego boosting marks in the first year’. Academic staff commented on being more conscious about scrutiny of marking standards by external examiners.
- Limited repertoire of assessment format in the 2nd year. A reason suggested was a decreased willingness by staff to experiment with assessment when marks count toward final degree classification.
- Limited control over curriculum content or structure in the second year (especially in vocational disciplines or subjects governed by external bodies).
- Whilst a step up in standards into the second year is acknowledged, it was highlighted that there was a protracted period between receipt of feedback in year 1 and an opportunity to apply recommendations of that feedback in year 2. This was seen as causing ‘coasting’ through semester 1.
- A lack of challenge for some students in the first year was postulated as nurturing overly relaxed attitudes as these students made the transition to the second year.
- The long summer break can contribute to students feeling disengaged, bored and worried that knowledge and skills gained in the 1st year might be lost.
- Participants described 2nd year induction as either ‘non-existent’ or ‘rudimental’. The overall feeling was that induction of the 2nd year cohort was a low priority and that a ‘you should have known everything by now’ attitude was prevalent in staff.
- Extensive student support available in the 1st year, perhaps ‘masks’ some pastoral or academic anxieties which then surface as problematic in the 2nd year.
- Although level 5 students might choose to do only what they need to do in order to pass, maturity often sets in at this age/level and some students take their work more seriously. This divide in students can be quite noticeable. Staff did not feel that any slump that may occur was the result of anything inherent in the programmes.

Additional assessment related findings

An in depth study that was undertaken at the Faculty of Science highlighted some additional curriculum related factors:

- Staff believe that the ‘strategic’ focus of some 2nd year students prevents them from making maximum use of formative assessment, when offered
- Academics from vocationally focused programmes felt that accreditation of their programmes by professional bodies might drive students more in the 2nd year
• Anonymous marking is perceived by some 2nd year students as not helpful, as they would like tutor to be able to comment on their ‘longitudinal’ progress and give an indication how they improved or worsened their performance in comparison with previous assignment.

**Perception of student welfare and support staff**

Professional services staff working in student support noticed that 2nd year students were ‘juggling a lot of very differing demands on their time and on their energies’ within and outside of their university studies. The following trends were highlighted:

• Student welfare services reported that their support in the 2nd year is less focused on practical issues (such as finances, accommodation etc) and more focused on psychological support (‘talking therapies’)  
• When ‘emergency’ funding is needed, year 2 students are more likely to be considered to be a low priority.

The following suggestions were made by academic and support staff:

• Stronger institutional messages are needed to raise the status of the 2nd year experience  
• Co-ordinated programme level approach for improving 2nd year teaching and learning is imperative. Programme validation or review could be the right time to start this discussion and make changes that are needed  
• 2nd year tailored personal tutoring system should be introduced (or re-introduced) as a means of enhancing interaction with the cohort and enabling student problems or issues to be picked up at an early stage  
• Students need to be given an opportunity to develop independent learning skills from the beginning of the second year, with opportunities for assessment and feedback early in the first semester  
• Summer break should be incorporated into the student learning cycle (e.g. via VLE based activities) to minimise the time and impact of student disengagement  
• Developing social learning approaches, promoting group work, refreshing learning skills and setting targets for the year should be key priorities of the 2nd year induction  
• The first year curriculum might need re-visiting to ensure it is challenging enough and encourages student engagement  
• Having a better understanding/capitalising on what happens between years 2 and 3 when many students show a noticeable improvement and enhanced motivation  
• Peer support (3rd years mentoring 2nd years) should be encouraged/implemented where possible as part of the curriculum.

**Outcomes**

The value of the project work is in the in-depth exploration of the 2nd year experience (which is a new strand in UK HE research) that not only informed curriculum interventions and institutional policies and strategies aiming to enhance 2nd year experience, but also brought national attention to the ‘forgotten’ year as an important stage in the student learning lifecycle.

**Aim 1: To characterise the dip in academic performance in the second year of study**

Having undertaken an in-depth longitudinal (over three years) study of student performance data we were able to characterise the slump, where it occurred, and to get a better understanding of the phenomenon on the institutional level.
The initial hypothesis of slump being a characteristic of specific subject area(s) or particular programs was rejected. Although between 18 and 21 large (over 20 students) LJMU programmes from a variety of subject areas demonstrated slump each year, only 8 were found to be consistent slomers. It was also found that the presence of slump on a programme level did not have any (direct) impact on student satisfaction, as indicated by the NSS and mirror survey. Another finding was that students on small (less than 20) programmes are more likely to slump, while students doing small joint degree programmes are particularly affected.

Exploration of demographic variables helped to unpick some interesting patterns in student performance. (See Appendix 2 for details of descriptive statistics). The following groups show a larger inclination/tendency to drop their marks in the second year:

Within **source of funding**: international students
Within **ethnicity**: BME students
Within **mode of study**: part time students

Through triangulation of other institutional data sets we were able to better understand behavior patterns and needs of the second year students as a cohort, as indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1. 2nd year attitudinal and behavioural patterns – as evidenced by various institutional data sets**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data source</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LJMU Student Survey (mirror of the NSS)</td>
<td>Lowest satisfaction scores across all categories amongst three cohorts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quantitative data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LJMU Student Survey open answers analysis</td>
<td>Attitude to concepts University, Feedback, Coursework and Year changes to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Leximancer)</td>
<td>unfavourable; emphasis on ‘goal reaffirmation’ and academic progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty attendance records</td>
<td>Increased absenteeism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Union Advice Centre statistics</td>
<td>Highest no. of academic enquiries that are not resolved at the faculty level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Student Support Services records</td>
<td>Second years are main users of talking therapies and counselling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SU survey</td>
<td>Cohort priorities are in supporting clubs and societies and improving bar facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological scales</td>
<td>Low self efficacy and switch to Performance goals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Psychological study**
When psychological characteristics of the slumping and non–slumping groups were compared, a small but practically significant difference was found in the Mastery Approach between these programmes, with students on non-slumping programmes reporting higher mastery goals.

There was also a difference in Level for Mastery with first year students orientated towards higher mastery goals than students in their second year. Amongst demographic data, t-tests did not show significant differences between the means of any scale for age, or accommodation, however, a moderate effect was found for gender with the mean score for female students higher on Mastery Avoidance than male students.

There were no statistically significant differences amongst first year students whether or not they were registered on slumpng or non-slumping programmes. The only differences found at Level 4 were that female students had higher Performance Avoidance goals than male students, and Law students had significantly higher mean scores than Accounting students on Mastery Avoidance.
At Level 5, students in slumping programmes had lower Mastery Approach goals. Amongst L5 students also, those who achieved higher mean marks in the preceding year had greater Study habits scores (small effect size) and higher Mastery Approach (moderate effect size).

In Slump x Level analyses, Metacognition, Self-efficacy, Performance Approach and Independence of Learning Beliefs reduce from L4 to L5 in slumping programmes, but increased to some extent in non-slumping programmes. Although there are no interaction effects, both Mastery Approach and Control of Learning beliefs also reduce from L4 to L5.

In Slump x Gender analyses, there was an interaction effect for Mastery Approach, with males on slumping programmes scoring lowest. In Course x Level analyses, there are some interesting differences across groups, but no over-riding pattern.

The findings from the exploratory quantitative research enabled programme teams to be better informed in relation to the needs of the second year as a cohort, and raised their awareness of ‘most at risk’ groups. Longitudinal investigation of the data was paramount in order to identify re-occurring patterns rather than to jump to a rushed conclusion based on a single year picture. The findings proved to be useful to other University Departments such as Quality, Student Advice and Wellbeing and to the Student Union: although they had some anecdotal evidence of behavioural patterns and issues specific to the 2nd year students, Service Departments did not necessarily have a chance to analyse the data by levels or get a more comprehensive picture combined with other institutional evidence.

The psychological findings need to be seen alongside other research to determine if it has any resonance. It seems that there is a possible general trend away from Mastery goals after the first year and yet students who have higher mastery goals tend to attain better marks. This could be further investigated at course level. Strategies to enable students to appreciate the value of thoroughly understanding subjects could be put in place, e.g. discussion at 2nd year induction. The research may influence course design, for example, in providing opportunities for students to gain a thorough understanding of their subject through problem-based learning projects, presentations, mentoring and teaching others.

Aim 2: To investigate the causes of the 2nd year dip in performance through qualitative inquiry

Qualitative research provided invaluable insights into the causes of the slump. Various methodologies/types of inquiry were employed (e.g. group discussions, individual on-off interviews and longitudinal (over two years) ‘life- story’ narrative inquiry) as well as different demographic profiles of the research participants (2nd and 3rd year students, mature students, and alumni - recent graduates) contributed to creating a rich picture of the 2nd year experience and helping to reveal variables that contribute to slump and those that promote engagement.

The qualitative data/investigation demonstrated that:

- There is a step up between first and second year. Although it is often talked about and addressed by staff, many students are not aware of what they have to do to meet the challenges of this stage and do not change their approach to study until it is too late. Many perceived it as a necessary learning curve: I think everyone needs the experience of the jump between first and second year, I think it’s an important part of your learning…
- Those students who were not fully prepared for the transition were more likely to slump
- Sophomore slump could be a ‘natural dip’, this could be part and parcel of the student experience: students believe that 2nd year is a good time to relax since ‘everybody knows – you will have to work very hard in your 3rd year’
Some students talk about a more relaxed attitude in the 2nd year (including attendance) because they ‘have done ok in the 1st year ok and can relax now a bit’

Peer opinion/‘received wisdom’ influences decisions on module choices and on attendance (‘they told us – this module was very difficult’)

Front loaded first year support enables failing students to pass, who then struggle in the second year

Second year students are more likely to differentiate between ‘important’ and ‘non –important’ learning activities which might affect their learning : ‘I found doing the essays and coursework to be a lot more important than going to lectures and listening’

Optional modules motivate students when linked to their academic interest: ‘I have chosen my module because I like it so I want to be more interested in class trying to talk to the lecturers…’

There are some direct implications of the qualitative findings for teaching as well as academic support and student wellbeing. Understanding the challenges of this stage in student life and being able to identify students in genuine need of support is important. While some students, although showing indications of slump, will easily recover and improve their achievements in the final year, others might need more attention and support with a second year slump leading to missed opportunities, a lack of belief in own’s abilities and dropping out from the university. Curriculum design should better reflect transitional periods. The LJMU World of Work Careers Centre noted benefits from insights into negative impact of second year slump on preparation for placement/placement search and its potential impact on future employability

**Aim 3: To develop strategies for enhancing the student learning in the ‘forgotten year’**

Project findings and recommendations drawn from the research informed small scale projects/practical interventions in Faculties and development of diagnostic instruments. These interventions included:

- Developing a Criminal Justice Community area on Blackboard (the institutional Virtual Learning Environment) to support student transition from level 4 to level 5
- Design of research module to initiate student-led research interests in second year (level 5) (School Art and Design)
- Tackling the Sophomore Slump in the School of Law through a tripartite approach: enhanced induction, enhanced support and student involvement in curriculum redesign
- Exploring Assessment, Communication and Community in the context of Undergraduate Second Year Experience’ (School of Natural Sciences and Psychology)
- Student representation/non-academic engagement in the second year (university wide research project)
- Case study of study behaviour in Geography
- Cross-level study of procrastination behaviour and study goal-orientation
- Raising students’ awareness of the 2nd year challenges and providing early diagnostics (midyear self-check quiz).

These initiatives are already showing some positive outcomes – via staff and student feedback and improved academic performance and engagement (e.g. School of Law). The interventions have been evaluated and shared institutionally and with external colleagues at our national project dissemination event (see Brooman &Darwen, 2013). Case studies are being finalised to maximise dissemination opportunities [http://secondyearexperience.ljmu.ac.uk/?page_id=801](http://secondyearexperience.ljmu.ac.uk/?page_id=801).

**Aim 4: To develop a tried and tested model for analysing institutional student record datasets to examine student performance trends that is worthy of transfer**
A template for institutional research activity is in the process of development and will be available for use by other institutions from September 2013.

A methodology has been developed to help programme teams ‘predict’ longitudinal slump based on cross-sectional data.

There are also significant outcomes emerging from the project that had not been initially envisaged:

- Serving as a focal point of interest, the project has stimulated much interest and cross-team networking (e.g. collaboration of academic, service teams and SU, cross service team work)
- Facilitation of data sharing and opened access to wider institutional datasets that were underexploited. The project improved programme teams’ trust in centrally generated and interpreted data.

Further work is needed to build up on these achievements.

At the same time the project unearthed problems with institutional data sharing/usage that need to be addressed, such as:

1. Organisational separation (location of data, timing of data release, format, unit of analysis, access and ownership of data, purpose of data (external / internal))
2. Conceptual separation (need to check for validity, contradictions and partial revelations)
3. Problems with data interpretation might arise as a consequence of ownership: understanding construction of the data collected by one department will not necessarily be the same in another department. Lack of / over contextualisation also takes place. Meta-tagging and data description are needed.

We have found the sheer scale of the datasets to be somewhat overwhelming and inherently complex. Although a challenge, this is a key part of the learning process that will be fundamental to the advice we are giving when consulting other universities on using institutional data.

**Project evaluation**

Project evaluation has been a dynamic process with a focus on dialogue and enquiry as part of the development process. Our approach to evaluation combined appreciative inquiry, focusing on what works, and why, rather than what does not (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), with ‘facilitated collaborative enquiry’ (via self evaluation and engagement with ‘critical friends’). Evaluation had an in-built formative as well as a summative function, with the project adopting a ‘plan, do, review’ cycle.

Self-evaluation has been documented in the minutes of meetings and captured via informal discussions, as well as being accompanied by a more formal questionnaire, which project team members were asked to fill in at the beginning of each year. The questionnaire provided an opportunity to reflect more specifically on the project’s progress to date, from which we were able to re-adjust priorities for the next academic year.

The following questions guided our reflections:

1. What have we learned so far about Sophomore Slump?
2. What were the major project achievements up to date?
3. What were the obstacles that prevented the project from achieving more?
4. What should be project's main priorities and desired outcomes for this academic year in the following areas:
   - knowledge and understanding
   - learning and teaching
• student engagement
• resources/evidence based outcomes
• project partners/ HE community engagement.

We used the Project Steering Group to support a model of ‘critical friend’ enquiry. We were fortunate to have the input of Dr Peter Hoekstra, Director of Institutional Research at the University of Amsterdam to provide an international perspective on institutional research and data warehousing. Becka Colley, Dean of Students and colleagues from the University of Bradford provided their perspectives based on their student life cycle model of the student experience. The Universities of Kingston’s and Bradford’s ‘Outduction’ NTF project was also a useful reference point for us, both in terms of its theme (the final year experience) and its approaches (student intern model).

Project dissemination

A series of dissemination activities sharing research findings and results of practical interventions took place institutionally and across the UK, providing an opportunity to get feedback from colleagues, develop networks and add to the project evidence base. These include 15 presentations at national and international conferences, 4 invited talks at various UK HEIs, 11 presentations at LJMU Teaching and Learning Conferences, 4 publications in international peer- reviewed journals and a book proposal.

Full details of national and international dissemination events and presentation can be found in Appendix 3.

Conclusions

The empirical work conducted at Liverpool John Moores University on the second year experience pointed to the important role of this stage in student life cycle. Slump, where it exists, is a function of personal growth that could be assisted on various levels – e.g. by student support and welfare mechanisms, via curriculum structures etc. There are direct implications of the project research findings and pedagogic initiatives for programme leaders, lecturers, managers, support staff and institutional data analysts (all of whom have – in one way or another – an interest in ensuring that the student experience is as successful as possible).

The project findings also indicated that awareness of the challenges students might face in their 2nd year should be extended to a broader range of stakeholders, not only academics and students themselves, but families and friends.

The project’s research findings were able to inform practical interventions in various areas, including student led curriculum change, engagement of students in research, building a 2nd year community site on the institutional VLE and enhancing 2nd year induction. Institutional awareness of the second year slump was raised with some curriculum initiatives being embedded in the Faculties (e.g. dedicated 2nd year induction and personal tutoring support tailored to the needs of the 2nd year students). These factors may have contributed to a noticeable decline in the slump in the 2nd year performance over four years (2008-2012) of its institutional monitoring. We believe that national awareness of the topic has also been enhanced.

The project readdressed the balance in the attention given to the different stages of the ‘student life-cycle’. We have created, explored and presented for discussion a variety of findings related to the second year student experience. Rather than seeing this research as an end point, or a set of conclusions, we feel we have just broken the ground and are now poised ready to plough new furrows into this fertile landscape of research.
Implications

There were a number of key success factors for the project which could be built upon/utilized by other HEIs. The project design and leadership offered a structure which allowed clear communication and collaboration channels between various University professional service departments and academics in Schools/Faculties. It also resulted in an effective ongoing dissemination of the project findings - not only within a group of academics who were engaged from the very beginning, but also bringing on board new teaching staff via PGCert, and academics attending development events. This laid solid foundations for creating a community of practice of academic and support staff who are interested in the second year experience.

Our experience of working with programme teams has highlighted the importance of the ‘intellectual’ engagement of academic and professional services staff with institutional data sets. It was done via raising academic awareness of what can be done with the data ready available, demonstrating various approaches to data triangulation and analysis to answer emerging questions related to student underperformance, retention or disengagement. These sessions are now incorporated as part of academic development activities.

The project created capacity for longer term impact with the institutional endorsement of the project recommendations through their inclusion of the 2nd year experience in University policies and strategies. Project recommendations are now reflected in the recently revised Personal Development Planning Guide and in the LJMU Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. The effect of some interventions will be felt only after the end of the project and there is a need to reinforce the importance of the topic and continue research in this area.

Project research has demonstrated that the issue of underperformance and disengagement in the 2nd year cannot be separated from the whole university life cycle, having roots in pre university achievements and dispositions, influenced by the first year experience and often having implications for the final year. This means that the project’s reach extends beyond the middle year experience to the whole student life cycle, emphasising synergy with other projects such as First year experience related projects, the NTF Outduction project and various employability initiatives.

There are clear implications for institutional data holders and institutional researchers, including a need for more effective data sharing and re-using, data meta-tagging and better contextualisation.

This project was also perceived as having an international value with the potential to identify similarities and differences in the nature of second year ‘slump’ in different educational models (e.g. American and UK).

Recommendations

A primary recommendation for the sector would be to avoid treatment of the second year and its issues as an isolated entity, but as a progressive stage within the dynamic and complex ‘journey’ through the three year undergraduate degree. Particular attention should be paid to transitional periods where significant numbers of students may find themselves lacking focus or even considering non-continuation. Our findings indicate that for some students the long summer break can contribute to ‘separation’ and accumulation of problems.

Specifically, our recommendations to course teams are to:

*Proactively manage the transition into the second year*
- enthuse students about upcoming academic content in the second year as the first year draws to a close. Beyond simply selecting options, offer engaging learning opportunities to maintain interest and habits of learning.
- maintain some contact over the lengthy summer break
- induction: support social activities. It cannot be assumed relationships formed in the first year resume
untaltered
- induction: ensure students become familiar with the step up in academic standards, ideally through active
  methods (exemplars, discussing criteria, marking activities)
- provide early feedback. There can be significant time gaps between the last feedback received in the first
  year and the first feedback received in the second year.
- surface the issues with students and promote dialogue as part of, say, tutorial sessions.

**Understand second year engagement in your own course**
Identify whether students ‘slump’ in your own course using existing data: students’ performance profiles,
attendance records, log in ‘traffic’ recorded on VLE systems, increases in coursework extension requests,
incomplete assessment items.

**Provide flexible learning opportunities**
- Students may be time-pressured due to extra-curricular activities or paid employment. Provide flexibility to
  support student learning online (e.g. through VLE support)
- Students can struggle with the step up in difficulty, particularly on technical modules. Ensure differential
  learning pace is accommodated through use of flexible resources and supportive assessment designs.

**Ensure support networks are responsive to changing student needs and concerns**
- support for pastoral issues (recognition of external pressures; dialogue)
- support for academic issues – via personal tutoring (effective time management; reducing assessment anxiety)
- provide opportunities to encourage formation of self-support networks (student mentors, peer support
  groups).

LJMU is a post 92 HE institution, but there is anecdotal evidence suggesting that 2nd year disengagement is
typical within other mission groups. There is a value in exploring the phenomenon in other institutions in
order to create a comprehensive national picture of the second year experience.

Internationally, there is a merit in engaging in collaboration with other countries, for example Australia, as we
are aware that an Australian team were planning to seek national funding to investigate second year slump.

**References**
(those in bold are resulted from/included findings from the project)

**Brooman, S., Darwent, S. and Pimor, A.** (2013). The student voice in higher education curriculum
design: Is there value in listening? (In review)

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Lieberman, D.A. and Remedios, R. (2007) Do undergraduates’ motives for studying change as they progress through their degrees? British Journal of Educational Psychology 77 (2), 379-95


Book proposal

C. Milsom, M. Stewart, M. Yorke, and E. Zaitseva, (Eds.). Stepping up to the Second Year at University: Academic, Psychological and Social Dimensions (book proposal been accepted for publication in the SRHE/Routledge book series ‘Research into Higher Education’).

Appendices

Appendix 1: Matrix showing alignment of data collection and analysis method to research questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data source</th>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Performance data</td>
<td>What percentage of students suffer a dip in performance in Year 2?</td>
<td>Descriptive statistical analysis of institution-level individual student mean mark profiles and ‘Good degree classification’ profiles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Which demographic groups are most at-risk of a slump in Yr2 performance?</td>
<td>Descriptive statistics: Profiles of mean mark &amp; good degree by Gender, Ethnicity, Domicile, Full/part time, Funding source.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are there relationships between demographic groups that allow ‘at-risk’ groups to be defined further?</td>
<td>Inter-correlations between demographic variables</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Can a slump in performance at Year 2 be predicted from key predictor variables?</td>
<td>Regression of demographic variables</td>
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<td>Can a proxy for a longitudinal slump in performance be developed?</td>
<td>Cross-sectional proxy methodology</td>
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<td>Which programmes show slump in Year 2 performance? How consistent is this?</td>
<td>Programme-level mean mark profiles and ‘Good degree classification’ profiles</td>
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<td>To what extent does a slump in Year 2 performance impact on a student’s final degree classification?</td>
<td>Sample analysis of borderline cases to establish impact of second year mark on exit mark</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychological data</td>
<td>Are student characteristics implicated in the Year 2 slump?</td>
<td>Measurement using established scales: Goal Orientation, Stress, Self-Efficacy, Motivational goals, Metacognition, Academic Locus of Control, Autonomous learning, data from WACE project, Procrastination, Goal Orientation Synthesis of profile data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What psychological profile characterises ‘at-risk’ students?</td>
<td>Measurement using established scales: Goal Orientation, Stress, Self-Efficacy, Motivational goals, Metacognition, Academic Locus of Control, Autonomous learning, data from WACE project, Procrastination, Goal Orientation Synthesis of profile data</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do interactions occur amongst psychological and demographic variables?</td>
<td>Inter-correlation analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary data sets</td>
<td>Does student participation change across levels?</td>
<td>Descriptive statistical analysis of class attendance data (Pharmacy case study)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are students at different academic levels more likely to</td>
<td>Descriptive statistical analysis of Records for welfare and personal support: Student</td>
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require pastoral support?  | Union advice statistics. Anecdotal quotes from LJMU welfare
---|---
How do students experience personal development support? | Descriptive statistical data and multinomial logistic regression of Student satisfaction survey data (NSS and LJMU Survey score profiles). Analysis of data from case study TES:PD surveys
Are there differences in student satisfaction by level? | Descriptive statistical data and multinomial logistic regression of Student satisfaction survey data (NSS and LJMU Survey score profiles). Analysis of data from case study TES:PD surveys
Are there specific experiences related to assessment and feedback identified in Year 2? | Descriptive statistical analysis of satisfaction scores on assessment-related items in student experience surveys (NSS, LJMU Survey, TESTA case studies).
Do students who undertake significant part-time work/sandwich placements fare better in Year 2? | Descriptive and inferential statistical analysis of Employment experience survey data (WACE, Business and Law data).

| Qualitative data | What are staff perceptions of the second year and second year cohort? Do academic staff perceive there to be a slump in performance in Year 2? | Staff focus groups (x3)
---|---|---
What is the second year perceived by current students? What factors are perceived to influence academic performance and general motivation to study in the second year? | Student focus groups (x5)
Semantic and content analysis of free-text comments from student experience survey data.
Case study: Experiences of modules at Year 2 (EU Law & Land Law)
How was the second year reflected upon by alumni, and to what were any challenges attributed? | Student one-to-one interviews (x3)
What are the critical time points, events and encounters across the duration of the second year that impact on an individual’s performance and motivation to study. | Individual longitudinal study (x6)

Appendix 2: Percentage of students who experienced a dip in performance in second year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Young</th>
<th>Mature</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>BME</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Intern.</th>
<th>Full time</th>
<th>Part time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>08-09</td>
<td>48.7%</td>
<td>48.1%</td>
<td>49.1%</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
<td>56.6%</td>
<td>47.6%</td>
<td>71.9%</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
<td>51.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09-10</td>
<td>41.8%</td>
<td>51.1%</td>
<td>42.0%</td>
<td>44.9%</td>
<td>52.0%</td>
<td>42.8%</td>
<td>49.2%</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>61.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3: Conferences and other dissemination events

1. 2013 Attribution or retribution? Exploring use of language in student experience surveys, European Association for Institutional Research (EAIR) Conference, August, Rotterdam

2. 2013 The Price of Expectation: are we getting it right? EAIR Conference, August, Rotterdam


4. 2013 (July) The student voice in higher education curriculum design: Is there value in listening? HEA Conference, July, Warwick (Poster presentation)

5. 2013 Making sense of student satisfaction: a level specific analysis of a survey open text comments using concept mapping software, Invited talk at the Pedagogic Research Study Day, University of Northumbria, July


7. 2013 Are student characteristics implicated in the Sophomore Slump? LJMU Teaching and Learning Conference, June, Liverpool

8. 2013 The forgotten year: things to remember, LJMU Teaching and Learning Conference, June, Liverpool

9. 2013 A dual approach to tackling the Sophomore Slump: student involvement in curriculum redesign and enhanced induction, LJMU Teaching and Learning Conference, June, Liverpool

10. 2013 Are student characteristics implicated in the Sophomore Slump? LJMU Teaching and Learning Conference, June, Liverpool

11. 2012 Keeping the students satisfied: a longitudinal, comparative, institutional analysis of survey free-text comments, SRHE, December, Cardiff

12. 2012 Waving or drowning? Surfacing the causes of student disengagement in the second year. European Association for Institutional Research (EAIR) Conference, Stavanger, September, Norway

13. 2012 Great excavations: unearthing institutional datasets to strengthen and inform university practice EAIR Conference, Stavanger, September, Norway

14. 2012 From data to practical knowledge: integrating institutional datasets for curriculum enhancement HEIR, July, University of Liverpool
15. 2012 Do Cross Sectional Student Assessment Data Make A Reasonable Proxy For Longitudinal Data? HEIR Conference, University of Liverpool, July

16. 2012 Students’ views about engagement, LJMU Teaching and Learning Conference, June, Liverpool

17. 2012 Evaluating and developing an approach to undergraduate student-centred research projects (levels 5, 6 and beyond), LJMU Teaching and Learning Conference, June, Liverpool

18. 2012 Stop to think: all that time spent designing transition and induction. Does it work? LJMU Teaching and Learning Conference, June, Liverpool

19. 2012 Assessing personal development (Personality and Emotional Intelligence) at level 5: A curriculum based exercise to consolidate student engagement, LJMU Teaching and Learning Conference, June, Liverpool

20. 2012 Reading between the numbers: reflecting on findings from a longitudinal institutional analysis of the NSS free text comments HEA Surveys for Enhancement Conference, May, Nottingham

21. 2012 Student expectation in a Contemporary Climate’, Invited talk HEA workshop, May, Chester University

22. 2011 Student engagement in curriculum design – developing practice, LJMU Teaching and Learning Conference, June, Liverpool

23. 2011 The student voice and the staff voice: experiences of gaining and implementing student feedback, LJMU Teaching and Learning Conference, June, Liverpool

24. 2011 The forgotten year: exploiting institutional datasets to illuminate the second-year slump, LJMU Teaching and Learning Conference, June, Liverpool

25. 2011 Improving the Experiences of Second Year Students, LJMU Teaching and Learning Conference, June, Liverpool

26. 2011 The forgotten year: exploiting institutional datasets to illuminate the second-year slump. HEIR Conference, Kingston University, June, London

27. 2011 LJMU approach to free text comments, HEA NSS Working Group, December, York

28. 2011 The Forgotten Year: using a mixed method institutional research to tackle the ‘Sophomore Slump, EAIR, August, Warsaw

29. 2011 ‘Can’t get no satisfaction: Discrepancies between NSS qualitative and quantitative data. Implications for quality enhancement’ HEA Surveys for Enhancement Conference, May, Nottingham

30. 2010 Why are some subjects more equal than others? ISSOTL, October, Liverpool

31. 2010 The forgotten students: turning our attention to the second year experience. Institutional Research: Informing Institutional Enhancement, Practice and Strategy Conference, June, Dublin

32. 2010 Enthusiasm, energy, evidence-base and a desire to improve the student experience – are these ingredients enough to turn around a poor progression rate? Ninth CLTR Learning & Teaching Research Conference, June, Edge Hill University
Appendix 4: Book proposal accepted for publication in the SRHE/Routledge book series ‘Research into Higher Education’

The forgotten year? The second-year experience and its enhancement

Editors: Mantz Yorke, Clare Milsom, Martyn Stewart and Elena Zaitseva
with contributions from Sue Darwent, Peter Hoekstra (University of Amsterdam), Sue Thompson and Wayne Turnbull

Rationale for the book

Quantitative analysis of student record data at Liverpool John Moores University revealed that, in a number of programmes, undergraduate student marks dipped in the second year of study. This reflected findings from the United States pointing to what has been termed a ‘Sophomore Slump’.

Research in the United States attributes the appearance of a ‘Sophomore Slump’ to a lack of direction and a sense of disconnection on the part of students (Graunke & Woosley 2005). It has been recognised in the United States that second year students have substantial needs but receive the least attention of all undergraduates (Pattengale & Schreiner 2000; Graunke & Woosley 2005; Gahagan & Hunter 2006), leading some (e.g. Tobolowsky 2008) to refer to the second year of study as the ‘forgotten year’.

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, where full-time bachelor’s degree programmes are typically three years in duration, attention (both scholarly and institutional) has been drawn to the importance of the first-year experience, not least because of its significance in retention, and to the final year because of its implications for graduates’ entry into the labour market. Although the structures of bachelor’s degree programmes in Scotland and Australia are different, a similar emphasis has been given to the first and last years of study programmes. In contrast, the second-year experience is less prominent in curriculum design and implementation: Gaff (2000) for example observes that ‘Sophomores often lack the benefit of an intentional curricular structure and feel as though they are in a curricular dead space’.

This book shines a light into a somewhat shadowy corner of the student experience – the second year. Whilst the empirical base is a range of data gathered in Liverpool John Moores University (some drawn from data routinely collected by the institution, some from intra-institutional research projects), its thrust invites colleagues from other institutions to consider whether the empirical data is reflected in their institutions and what might be done to enhance their students’ experience of the second year. In other words, the empirical data that are mainly from one institution have a broader ‘carry’ because, together with the discussion throughout the book, they can act as prompts towards reviewing current practices relating to both ‘the student experience’ and the handling of institutional data. In line with international moves to advance evidence-gathering to inform policy-making and curricular design (HEA 2008; Bond 2009; Strick & Creagh 2008), this book addresses an issue that is important across the higher education sector – that of accessing and handling very large institutional datasets – by exemplifying how student record data can be interrogated to the benefit of both institutional practices and ‘the student experience’.

After laying out the argument for an extended analysis of the second-year experience (Chapter 1), the book examines whether the second year has a defined identity or whether its identity is defined only by its relationship with the preceding and succeeding years of the curriculum (Chapter 2). The institutional focus of
Chapter 2 is complemented in Chapters 3 and 4 by evidence (qualitative and quantitative) from students’ experience of their second-year curricula. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on different aspects of how institutions can respond to the needs thrown into relief by the empirical data from Liverpool John Moores University and elsewhere. Chapter 7 demonstrates how an institution can be ‘data rich but information poor’ and shows, drawing on experience at the University of Amsterdam, how a ‘data warehouse’ can be used to serve an institution’s needs. Chapter 8 draws upon the evidence presented in the preceding chapters to set out ways in which the second-year student experience can be enhanced in practice through action at various levels in an institution.

Chapters

Preface

A short Preface indicates the rationale for the book, points to the range of potential readers (which encompasses managers; academics; support staff who engage with students; and data analysts.), and indicates ways in which different readers might wish to navigate their way through the book.

1 Why study the second year?

The issue of student retention has been a focus of higher education policy in the US, Australia and the UK, since it has significant implications for both institutions and students. The first-year student experience is, for many students, a critical determinant of whether they persist or depart from higher education: models such as those of Tinto (1993) and Bean and Eaton (2000) relate their decision-making process to sociological and/or psychological responses to experience. Yorke’s (1999) work in the UK demonstrated that, as elsewhere, premature departure from study programmes is predominantly a first-year issue – hence the surveys of the first-year experience in the US (Ruiz et al, 2010), Australia (James et al, 2009) and the UK (Yorke and Longden, 2007). At the other end of undergraduate programmes, the primary focus of attention is on graduate outcomes (in terms of summative assessments and of entry into the labour market, with institutions being sensitive to their position in ‘league tables’ or rankings) – see for example CHERI and Hobsons Research (2008). This chapter locates the second year within the trajectory of full-time study, surveys the limited evidence in the literature relating to the second-year experience, and argues that the comparatively limited attention given to the second year of programmes may contribute to the dip in performance that has been noted in some programmes, and in some students’ marks.

2 What defines the second year?

The contention of this chapter is that the second year of UK higher education is left relatively undefined as it lies between the first and final years, both of which have widely understood features. The picture is more complicated where programmes run for durations other than three years: in the US, for example, there is a strong tendency towards ‘2+2’ year programmes, and in the UK there are 4-year ‘sandwich’ programmes in which the third year is often spent on a work-related placement or a period of study abroad.

The divergent attention on the beginning and end of programmes has implications for the quality of the programme as a whole: if the second year of a 3-year full-time programme lacks a clear focus, then teaching, learning and student achievement may be adversely affected. Considerations of quality and standards require that the second-year experience is given a positive identity rather than being treated as an intermediate between two more strongly articulated years.

This chapter explores national and institutional expectations regarding quality assurance and the perceptions of staff regarding what might be termed ‘second year-ness’ (and its equivalent in other systems) through
documentation and experiences of curriculum validation. It also compares UK approaches to the second year with those elsewhere – for example, in the US the second year is typically the year during which students confirm their choices of study for the final two years. At appropriate points, consideration will be given to the middle years of 4-year programmes, and to the equivalent part-time programmes of study.

In scrutinising the second-year experience from a variety of angles, the chapter establishes a context for those that follow.

3 Shifting perspectives

This chapter illustrates, through both qualitative and psychometric data collected at LJMU, how students’ concerns shift as they move into and progress through the second year. Analyses, using the Leximancer software, of first- and second-year students’ free text responses to institutional surveys (mirroring the UK National Student Survey) show a marked shift: whereas the first-year experience of the course is positively associated with the affective domain (with senses of belonging and feeling well supported to the fore), the second-year experience of the course is positively associated with the cognitive domain, with teaching and learning becoming prominent. Whereas for many students the first year is in effect an extended induction into higher education, the second year is when their academic performance gains in significance because it ‘counts’ in most institutions towards the classification of their honours degree. The analyses in this chapter are tempered by the fact that some students are, to some extent, repeating in their first year content already studied at A-Level, whereas others may be treading intellectually new ground.

4 Orientation to learning during the second year

Whilst Chapter 3 shows how students’ perceptions of their courses tend to shift during the first and second years, Chapter 4 addresses how students’ orientations to learning and their engagement with their studies evolve over time, and is supported by empirical data from students at LJMU, including a small-scale longitudinal study and student focus groups. The empirical findings are related to the wider literature on student engagement (from the National Survey of Student Engagement and related instruments) and on approaches to study.

5 Curriculum design: implications for teaching, learning and assessment

Chapter 2 indicated the potential problems when the starting-points and the end-points of curricula are defined but the middle-years of curricula lack positive definition. This chapter discusses the ways in which programme leaders and course teams can, through curriculum design, create greater definition of the second year and mitigate some of the influences that can lead to year 2 underperformance. The chapter then moves into a discussion of the implications of design for initiatives focusing on the enhancement of teaching, learning and assessment. In addition to ‘supply-side’ initiatives, the chapter addresses the important issue of engaging students in the shaping of expectations. Modular programmes are particularly challenging, in that for some staff it is difficult to appreciate the learning trajectories chosen by students (a matter touched on in Chapter 7).

6 Curriculum design: implications for personal development and support

Whilst there is a considerable amount of evidence relating to the role of academic support in assisting student success and retention the coverage is dominated by the first-year experience. The second year, in contrast, is much less well served by the literature.

Many staff in the study at LJMU pointed to the disparity in the level of attention given to first- and second-year students, echoing experience in the US. This chapter will report the perceptions of staff and students regarding the support provided for second-year students, and will cover academic matters (e.g. attendance; feedback; use of institutional learning resources) and more pastoral matters (e.g. engagement with counselling.
and other support services), as well as matters that lie towards the middle of the academic/pastoral continuum (e.g. personal development planning). The chapter draws on data from interviews and focus groups ranging across subject disciplines and students’ backgrounds.

Drawing on student development theory and the empirical findings, the chapter discusses the optimisation of learner support, including specific time points when this support could be critical for student academic engagement and progression. It also highlights factors that could hinder a learner’s successful transition from the first to the second year.

### 7 Maximising the use of institutional data

The research study at LJMU unearthed a hitherto unsuspected number of data sources, many of which were held in local repositories rather than in an institutional repository. A key data source is the student record system: however, using student record data typically requires institutional researchers to make compromises, since the data recorded for one kind of institutional purpose do not necessarily fit the needs of analyses undertaken for other purposes. This chapter will describe the range of data unearthed and will discuss how such data might best be put to practical use. The potential in institutionalising data will be exemplified via a case study from the University of Amsterdam which has gone further than most in establishing a ‘data warehouse’.

### 8 Using evidence to inform practice

The preceding chapters point towards actions whose intention is to enhance the second-year student’s experience and by extension the level of success achieved across the programme. Whilst these are located at the programme and sub-programme level, there are issues that the institution as a whole may need to address – and with particular dispatch in the current UK context of sharply rising tuition fees. This chapter argues that institutions should delve quite deeply into the trajectories of students’ experiences in order to understand the many factors impinging on their achievements (e.g. disciplinary cultures; staff perceptions of the second year of study; intended learning outcomes in curricula; and students’ attitudes and approaches to study). This work can be subsumed under the banner, more common in the US, of ‘institutional research’ in which data are collected and analysed in the interest of promoting institutional effectiveness. The implications for staff development are also discussed.

The second part of this chapter is what could be described as ‘a guidebook for busy academics and administrators’ which can act rather like those ‘quick-start’ booklets for electronic devices that provide the essentials to get them up and running, with the fuller text (the preceding chapters) available for consultation as required. It sets out a series of examples showing where practices at at a variety of levels (students’ engagement, curriculum design and implementation, and that of the institution) can be informed by evidence. The exemplifications are written in a style that will encourage even the busy reader to engage with the detail contained within the preceding chapters.
The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Higher Education Academy.

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