Support for students to improve transition

Brunel University London is proud of the diversity of its student body and accepts students with a range of non-traditional entry qualifications, such as BTEC, Access, and Foundation Courses. With increasing numbers of BTEC students progressing into Higher Education (HE), universities are under pressure to offer more academic skills support to prepare students for their studies (Smith et al, 2015).

This is a collection of case studies on initiatives designed to support transition into university. It includes examples of existing good practice at Brunel University London as well as new approaches introduced as part of the HEA-funded Improving Transition Project. This guide looks at three different interventions:

1. Using video to support inclusive learning in first year accounting
2. Peer-Assisted Learning as a transition tool
3. Skills in focus: Preparing for exams session

Our work on first year transition comes out of qualitative research to find out more about the experiences of students entering University with BTECs. Findings from these interviews indicated that in their first year BTEC students experience significant difference in teaching and assessment methods from the approaches at school and college. Assignment briefs used on BTEC courses are indicative of a directed pedagogical approach that provides extensive guidance to learners (Gartland and Smith, 2015). This has the potential to lead students into uncritically reproducing information from supplied texts, which may persist into the first year of HE study (Cook and Leckey, 1999). Successful transition then involves universities supporting ‘dependency-deconstruction’ to move towards being an independent learner (Keane, 2011); a process that involves FE and HE collaboration to support learners in their development journey.

Our HEA-funded transition project has allowed us to investigate further the challenges these students face, and to pilot and evaluate a variety of mechanisms for supporting transition. Each of our student-facing interventions that are explored here are accessible to all first year students, but take into account the particular needs of students with non-traditional entry qualifications who we anticipate would benefit most.

We see supporting students as one strand to improving transition; our other focus is on supporting academic staff to improve the outcomes of our students. We have produced another guide to show our work in this area as part of this project.

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Using video to support inclusive learning in first year accounting
Sue Hardman, Teaching Fellow, Brunel Business School

Background
Accounting is sometimes an area that students come into University with little or no experience of. For example, we have a large cohort of BTEC students for whom accounting is an optional module in the curriculum. Our Introduction to Accounting course is a core first year module for all students on our BSc Business and Management programmes, regardless of the specialism they pursue in their second year. In subjects like accounting that require skills and knowledge to be developed sequentially, poor student engagement can create significant challenges when it comes to succeeding in the course.

We recognise that some students lack confidence when faced with numerical subjects. Using an inclusive approach to learning and teaching, the rationale behind this initiative was to create a set of resources that students’ could work through at their own pace. In conjunction with the existing resources on Blackboard Learn – such as lecture notes and revision exercises – the videos take into account the variety of learning needs and preferences that our students have to provide a varied and engaging virtual learning environment.

Using video
Lecture capture software was used to create a series of lecture recordings to support the accounting course. The software allows PowerPoint presentations, audio and video to be captured in the same recording. It can be created under controlled conditions, rather than live in a lecture, to be viewed before lectures or released at the end of term for revision. Once created, these videos can be used year-on-year to support learning. They are also sufficiently flexible to be edited based on student feedback to update the resource, rather than creating a whole new video.

In Accounting, the videos were narrated by the course lecturer and the exercises were worked through by hand to create a personal feel to the resources. They were released on Blackboard for each lecture, where students’ engagement with the material was tracked to measure how popular these new resources were compared to existing materials on the site.

Our findings
The results from the module feedback survey would suggest that the introduction of videos enhanced the student experience as student feedback was 100% positive. Usage significantly increased across the two terms as the collection grew and in the lead up to exams. Students appeared to engage with the online videos as a resource for revision rather than a replacement of lectures and seminars, which supports the view that lecture capture facilities are a revision tool for blended learning rather than a tool for distance learning.

When compared with existing resources, the tracking data revealed that lecture recordings were used more than past exam papers and revision exercises in revising for exams. Student feedback suggests that once students used the video resources they signalled they were their preferred revision resource.
Peer-Assisted Learning as a transition tool
Andrew Williams, Peer-Assisted Learning Manager

Background
Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) is a well-established model of student-to-student learning that offers a wide range of potential benefits to students, including in the areas of employability, transition, retention, and attainment (Keenan, 2014). For students, PAL is a safe place to discuss difficult topics whilst developing friendships and enhancing skills and study habits. For PAL leaders, it is an enjoyable way to support students on the same course and to further their own development.

The PAL scheme has completed its first pilot year in Computer Science, Maths and Occupational Therapy; it is being expanded to include Mechanical Engineering, Civil Engineering and Business in 2016/17.

PAL at Brunel
Sessions are led by PAL leaders, who are normally students in the year above (either level 2 or 3 students). The activities are creative in nature and encourage a collaborative approach to learning and problem solving.

PAL leaders receive two days of training, which focuses on the facilitation skills leaders will need to guide discussion and information on the remit of their work. We make it clear to our students that they are not there to teach, but instead their role is to run creative activities to encourage a collaborative approach to learning and problem solving.

PAL leaders are supported by an academic coordinator in the department throughout the year, as well as 1 FTE staff member from the Academic Skills Service.

Our findings
When surveyed, our PAL leaders identified their leadership and communication skills as the most improved. They also said that PAL improved teamwork, confidence, creative thinking, problem solving and organisation.

The students who attended reported that PAL sessions helped them with exam preparation, assignments and understanding the course and the University. These findings suggest that PAL has provided valuable support for student transition in the three pilot departments. Further research will be conducted to identify benefits to students’ retention and attainment.

“[PAL] has allowed me to develop the ability to explain a scenario or problem in different ways and to take a more creative approach to solving a problem”

Maths PAL Leader
Skills in focus: Preparing for exams session

Background
Lack of exam experience is a key area of concern particularly for students entering university with vocational qualifications (Gartland and Smith, 2015). In a 2013/14 internal pilot study exploring the experiences of BTEC students, 75% of students found that preparing for and undertaking exams were the most challenging and daunting aspect of their first year. As a result of this research it was recommended that the Academic Skills Service (ASK) offered sessions on topics such as preparing for exams and revision in collaboration with academic departments that have a high proportion of BTEC learners.

Preparing for exams session
The ‘Preparing for Exams’ sessions were trialled in Civil Engineering, Electronic and Computer Engineering, and Mechanical Engineering. Students were invited to attend a one-hour session on how to prepare for exams before the Easter break. The focus was on the following areas:

- Planning revision and getting started
- Revision techniques
- What to expect in exams: on-the-day information and exam regulations
- Academic support during the revision period

The session was facilitated by ASK in collaboration with a member of staff from that academic department and delivered in a lecture style to accommodate large groups of learners.

Our findings
Students were given a survey to complete at the start and end of the session to measure any differences they identified in terms of their confidence, and their knowledge of revision techniques and where they can access additional support.

BTEC students were twice as likely to ‘disagree’ or ‘strongly disagree’ to the statements “I feel confident about revising” and “I feel confident about the exams” than A-level students at the start of the session. At the end of the session, BTEC and A-level students registered greater confidence, but BTEC students were the most improved.

We will continue to look at how skills sessions such as this can be more effectively embedded in the first year as part of our transition support provision.
Bibliography


