A good start equals a good stay: providing a positive induction experience

Deeba Parmar, Middlesex University

Dr Beverley Crooks, Brunel University

Abstract

Universities are only too aware of the ways in which their student profiles are changing, however it remains a challenge for staff to identify how they should respond to the increasing diversity resulting from widening participation. This paper aims to identify areas of the induction process that meets the needs of first year students in a pre and post 1992 higher education institutions, namely Brunel and Middlesex. These two London based universities have good performance indicators for widening participation holding positions one and two in the list of institutions that have expanded full time undergraduate numbers in HEFCE (2001), and have both developed Access Agreements to recruit the brightest and most disadvantaged students in 2006. The universities are geographical competitors; therefore strategies to attract and retain students are central to their existence. However, the universities represent different ends of the retention spectrum; one has a withdrawal rate of less than 7% while the other has a rate of 15%. Nevertheless, both universities recognise that the initial induction process has a significant impact upon a student's perceptions of the university and plays a vital role in a student's decision to either continue with their studies or withdraw as stated in their missions and visions. The current study reports on the collaborative findings of research during the first six weeks of the autumn term 2003. This paper reports on the joint findings of the students' reflections on their induction experience with the particular emphasis on the students' perception of the purpose of induction, their satisfaction with the this period and gives suggestions on developing effective induction strategies. The results reveal that although the institutions are vastly different, they face similar problem issues. The task of universities old and new is to recognise value and respond to these needs.

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Introduction

The student body within higher education institutions (HEIs) had generally been viewed as a homogenous group with institutions generally catering for the more traditional members. However, this profile for many universities may no longer be realistic. In view of the drive to widen participation to broader sections of society, the notion of the 'traditional student' is becoming increasingly blurred. In recent years a strong view has emerged, suggesting that in order for universities to maximise the potential of their learners more emphasis is needed to support the profile of students that they currently have (Thomas et al, 2002). To achieve this, identifying and meeting the needs of the growing student body are now priorities for all HEIs. This study aims to develop mechanisms to ease transition and encourage retention of all students. This research derives from concerns from both universities in understanding the issues related to the profile of the students they attract. With access and retention instigating change it was decided that research was needed in order to address the challenges that both the institutions and students face.

2 Aims

The focus' of this research is to explore how and where the induction programme meet the needs of the students. It is also to ascertain what can further be done to ensure the induction process better meets these needs and expectations in order to provide a more fulfilling student experience. The broad aims of this research are:

- To identify areas of the induction experience that meet the needs of the students and those areas that fail to do so
- To recommend activities to tailor the induction experience to better meets the needs of the student population.

3 Value to the sector.

During the last twenty years financial and structural reform has ensured that the public and private sectors engage in discourse regarding, image, excellence, total quality management and globalisation. Belanger (2002) states that the overriding

reasons for universities to engage in this discourse are financial survival and responsiveness to stakeholders.

Universities are now asking themselves questions such as: How do we remain competitive? How do we identify with our students? How do we enhance our reputation? How should we react when we feel our reputation has been damaged or threatened? How can we improve the students' experience of induction and our retention rate? According to Belanger (2002) there is an urgent need for coherence in projecting institutional image, in coordinating all aspects of communication and services, and in identifying with a credible set of values and type of behaviour. Those institutions that can 'stay close to the customer' will survive and prosper. Undoubtedly, the retention of students is important in safeguarding financial security.

According to Levitz et al (1999), a high retention rate is an indication that an institution is meeting student expectations with regard to satisfaction and success. However, the pool that students are drawn from also heavily influences retention rates as is seen in the works of Reay et al (2004), Archer et al (2004) and Thomas (2002) state that. Students who have had recent experiences in highly academic institutions for example, are likely to be retained in university sector as their level of preparedness is much more developed. AASCU (1997) also confirms that institutions with relatively high graduation rates have more stringent admissions criteria, and as a result attract students whose approach to learning matches those of the institution.

The value of this research to the wider field of the literature surrounding induction and retention issues emphasises the importance of the students' opinions and experience which is particularly timely with the forthcoming top up fees (starting 2006/7) with students adopting more of the critical consumer approach when choosing to enter higher education. This research also demonstrates the usefulness of collaborative research particularly for these two institutions as the make-up, demographics and history of the two are very different which brings much interest and relevance to the research. However due to the geography they are both recruiting heavily from the same areas and therefore thought appropriate to undertake combined research. In working collaboratively not only have the two institutions been able to

share information but also learn from each other. The research will have relevance to a far wider range of universities and will be disseminated and inform the larger field.

4 Context

The previous decade has witnessed many changes in the HE sector, and faces many challenges. Some of these are highlighted in the context of continuing education are the phenomenon of the 'borderless world': the 'ever widening clientele base'; the growth of new forms of learning: the changing concepts of academic space and time and the growth of new kinds of organisation to manage knowledge enhancement and skills transfer (Adekanmbi, 2004:87).

The diversification of the sector is possibly, the singularly largest challenge institutions face in creating, fostering an encouraging and supportive learning environment that caters for the diverse student groups within it.. The student body has become increasingly varied in terms of demographics mainly gender, ethnicity, age, culture and social class. Research exploring student experience issues and specific demographic groups are becoming more common as they are ways at which to learn about these students needs. Research demonstrating this includes McGiveny (1996) who looked at the non-completion of adult learners in further and higher education and Leach & Zepke (2001) who explored the discourses of institutions in New Zealand on how they can better meet the needs of the expanded student body. Much research has looked at the relationships between socio-geodemographics and the student experience, with an emphasis on the element of disadvantage for particular groups of students (for more details see Archer et al (2004), Reay et al (2001) Ball (2003) and Davis (2005).

The changes in the fee system in the 1990s have also brought an added dimension of uncertainty to the HE sector in which a sense of 'consumer culture' has been established. Students are now more assertive and challenging about the type of quality they receive, particularly in view of the introduction of top up fees in 2006. In order for HEIs to compete universities are going to have to become far more transparent in what they are offering. Essentially a 'student experience' is being sold and higher education establishments are going to have to recognise that the current climate needs to address the purpose of higher education today in order to remain

competitive in today's market. In the very pragmatic sense an element of higher education for some students is viewed as a service or tool rather than a nurturing, challenging developmental environment.

As research illustrates (Parmar & Trotter 2005) some students are dissatisfied with the 'service' they have received and this has influenced their student experience and contributed to their withdrawal from the university.   This has prompted the sector to contemplate its changing role in society highlighting Bourdieu's theories of habitus in education (Reay 2004, Thomas 2001) implying that higher education predominantly caters for particular groups in society, namely the middle/upper classes eluding the lower classes contribution.

Issues of retention and progression have therefore been brought to the forefront of sectorial and institutional policy with concerns of the implications of these challenges on withdrawal figures. This has lead to an increasing emphasis on the first year experience and a plethora of retention related research has been undertaken. These can roughly be separated into distinct groups i) taxonomy approach whereby research identifies and defines characteristics and behaviours of withdrawers (see works of Mackie (2001), Ozga & Sukhnandan (1998)) ii) single issues approach where issues such as pastoral care or student services are looked at in relation to retention (Thomas et al 2002, SCOP & UUK 2002) and iii) combined approaches whereby types of students and identifying their particular needs relating to retention, for example mature students (Reay et al 2002)**,** lower socio-economic groups (Yorke & Thomas 2003) and first generation student (Ishitani 2003).

As illustrated, the rise in concern stems from a combination of factors, namely; the increase in student diversity particularly in combination with the increase in student/staff ratio alongside the relative static nature of the funding available in institutions, government pressures particularly the widening participation target (see The Future for Higher Education) and the increasing realisation of the importance of the student experience (Johnston 2003, Parmar & Trotter 2005).   Furthermore concerns have been heavily voiced concerning standards within higher education the subject for concern illustrated regularly in the national media (Readers Digest February 2005, Hill 2005, Smithers 2004, Baden 2004, BBC News 2004) and

government white papers. It is implied that these changes to the HE sector and the challenges brought with them have had detrimental affect to the retention and progression of student (Yorke 1999) particularly within institutions that have greater challenges to face (Laing & Robinson, unpublished). These challenges include the amount of funding per student, having a high student to staff ratio, having high staff turnover and have high numbers of part time staff.   The implications retention figures have on institutions are particularly great when considering government quality audits, league position, funding, universities own mission statements and reputation.

With the growing emphasis of the importance of this area, retention research at institutional based level has become increasingly common. The past decade has seen a surge in literature relating to the student experience, retention (Yorke 1999; 2001, Mackie 2001, Dodgson & Bolam 2002) and more specifically the impact of the induction experience (Darlaston et al 2001, Mclinden 2003, Morgan & Lister 2003, Samson 2005).

The importance of the induction experience
From the institutions' perspective, the purpose of induction is for numerous reasons argue Bush, Middle and Wood (1997) and Clements (2004). Essentially it is to introduce the students to the ethos of the university, to higher education and what it is to be a student.   Additionally it is to process the administrative aspects of the enrolment procedure and to ensure the students are provided with the necessary documentation in order to participate in the full student experience, i.e. student card, library/computer ID, etc. The induction period is to also make students aware of the services that are available to them and to help the students to become more familiar with the university, their chosen course, members of staff and most importantly, one another. As vast literature illustrates the importance of peer support (Ody 2004) a primary function of this period is to help to ease the transition into university and to encourage the students to bond with peers to form friendships. Relationships are key in smoothing the transition not only helping to alleviate fears and share concerns but also spur on one another and contribute to providing a positive student experience (Fisher & Hood 1987, Abrahamson, 2003 Johnson 1994, STAR Project).

Contextualising the universities

Institutional summary

Middlesex and Brunel are both London based institutions. Their missions actively encourage access and diversity and they both draw upon much of the same catchment area of London and the surrounding area. Both institutions are committed to widening participation and this has implications for the strategies used to introduce new students to the structures and systems associated with studying in higher education. These factors further lend to the interest of this collaborative research. The two institutions however differ considerably in a number of factors, including difference in the size and scale of the universities and the length of time holding university status.

Middlesex University

Middlesex University is the larger of the two universities with over 25,000 students of which some 4,000 are studying at postgraduate level. The university has demonstrated commitment to access and diversity in its missions and strategies, which is clearly reflected in the student cohort.

The university illustrates its obligation to access but recruiting high numbers of students from low participatory areas. Middlesex is within the top ten UK HEIs for; the highest intake of state school students (99%), the most working class students (Bands C2, D and E) (44%) and students from low participation backgrounds (13% of the entrants).

Middlesex University is also viewed as being an institution with a considerably international student base with 25% of full time students categorised as international students. In conjunction, it is also seen to be as a very local university with 54% of its entrants from the London area, 29% of these being from the local North London area. The dominance of the local population is not surprising with the significant presence of the university comprising of five campuses over the North London region, in Hendon, Barnet, Enfield and Tottenham. The make-up of Middlesex University further illustrates its diversity with a substantial proportion of students from ethnic minority backgrounds, reflecting the cosmopolitan city of London. The various cultures, ethnicities and races of students is encouraged and viewed as a positive factor of the richness of Middlesex University make up but also demonstrates the

challenges of a diverse population. These concerns are highlighted by HEFCEs 'Diversity in Higher Education' policy statement (00/33):

> Those [students] needs are becoming increasingly varied, most obviously
> in the expectations, abilities and circumstances of students as participation
> in higher education gets progressively wider, but also in the understanding
> of how higher education can contribute to the economic, cultural and social
development of the nation.

Although the policy take-up of non-traditional students in the university is high, the retention figures reflect these challenges with t Middlesex having an overall first year retention rate of 85% (HEFCE 2003/59 TableT3a).

Brunel University

Brunel is a research university and in contrast to Middlesex is the older, more established of the two. It was created in 1966 and one of the few universities named after a person rather than a place the Victorian Engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel. The university is currently undergoing considerable changes to the structure of its learning environment by reverting back to its original single campus structure, closing three other campuses over 3 years. This is due to the recognition of the advantages of a condensed learning environment in which all resources can be pooled together to produce a greater learning environment and experience for the students.

 Brunel recruits UK domiciled students nation-wide, however the University, similar to Middlesex, has a high proportion of students recruited from the local area. In 2003/2004 more than three-quarters (76.3%) of undergraduates accepted onto courses were from London or the South East (UCAS Table 2A 2003). The student population represents 110 different countries worldwide and has as international population of around 1,200 students.

Brunel's overall population is 13,500, of whom approximately 2,000 are postgraduates. In contrast to Middlesex, Brunel has a relatively small number of part time students but similar to Middlesex, Brunel has a large ethnic minority population,

with minority ethnic students making up nearly 55% of the current student population (www.brunel.ac.uk/registry/rraa/Pop_Ethnicity2003_4.html. However, some ethnic groups such as Asian are better represented than others. As HEFCE performance indicators show Brunel exceeds its benchmarks for students from social classes IIIM, IV and V, and we can infer that student make-up is well mixed. Young/mature student intake is not so well balanced with only 24% of the 2003 undergraduate intake being over the age of 21, and only 7% of the 2003 undergraduate intake being aged 30+ (Brunel University Undergraduate Intake Analysis 2003/4. These figures are not representative of the high proportion of mature students found across London's Higher Education institutions more generally.

University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) data indicates that Brunel received 22,493 applications for 2003 entry. This places Brunel in the top 25 universities with the highest number of applicants. From these applications, Brunel accepted 2,730 students onto degree courses highlight both the reputability and competitiveness for both students and institutions.

Brunel has a good retention rate for its first year students, as the following HEFCE Performance Indicators highlight. Compared to the UK ('All UK Institutions') average:

- 4% of young full time first-degree entrants from low participation neighbourhoods are not in Higher Education the year after entry. This is compared to a UK average of 10%
- 5% of young full time first-degree entrants from other neighbourhoods are not in Higher Education the year after entry. This compares to a UK average of 7% (taken from which ref?)

These statistics demonstrate that both Brunel and Middlesex University consist of a diverse profile, with Middlesex consisting of well above the UK averages for the socio-geodemographic mix of students whilst Brunel statistics illustrating their exceptional retention figures, particularly students from low participation neighbourhoods.

Research methodology

The research was intended to employ a range of data collection methods, including a literature review, focus groups, questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and a review of policy. Interviews and focus groups encouraged the participants to give an open and honest account of their experiences of the university induction process. Although a series of focus groups were planned, timetable and work commitments prevented this from happening resulting in a series of one to one interviews. In order to compare institutional results, both researchers adhered to similar interview schedules and questionnaire. For example, both institutions were particularly interested to investigate the extent to which students felt valued during the induction process.

The research adopts a qualitative methodology in employing focus groups and semi structured interviews as the tools of the inquiry. This is due to the nature of the subject and to allow participant to freely express and emphasis elements of *their* experiences which they had felt contributed to their impression of induction. By conducting this research face to face, this also helped to validate its authenticity as body language, expressions, gestures and tone of voice could also be used as a form of conveying information. Whilst qualitative methodologies allow for more depth of answers and allows for either the participant or researcher to alter the topics covered in the interview there are criticisms of these more recent perspectives being too subjective and therefore open to error (Bernstein 1974 cited in Cohen et al 2003). However, as the students were made aware of the role of both researchers gathering the data and made clear that neither would be involved in teaching it was hoped that the students would be honest in their experiences as no direct relationship would be linked to them later. As interview data is mediated through the instrument of the research, human contact (Creswell 1994 cited in Punch 2003), it is intended that non-verbal communication will identify dishonesty.

Both researchers will be involved in the analysis of both sets of data in order to interact and become familiar, submerged in the data. By familiarising themselves with both data sets themes emerged as did clear similarities and differences.

Data collection occurred during the first six weeks of the academic year in order that relevant issues could be recalled readily. The students in the current study were drawn from across the universities studying in a range of subject areas. Previous educational experiences include those straight from school and college as well students who were studying part time while still in full time employment. Although a significant number lived on campus, others lived in close proximity to the university. A large number of these students had no family history of higher education. Students were aged between 18 and 43 years.

Sample of participants

Although the sample of this research is fairly small, for the context of this research the sample is adequate at exploring the students' views of their induction experience as the sample is representative, in terms of demographics, of the institutional bodies. We have also used the interviews to get detailed, specific data and therefore gaining this from a large sample of participants would have been very time consuming and possibly not any more helpful. Here are some examples of the participants of this research. In all cases pseudonyms have been given.

Participant 3

Rita is a 30-year-old student from the North London area. She has chosen to go onto higher education after bring up a family and feels now she will be able to commit herself to a degree as both of her children have started school. Rita feels confident about the challenge as she has the emotional support of her family and will be studying full time, so able to give it her full commitment.

Participant 4

Johnny is a 19-year-old, local based student coming to university directly from college. As he does not drive he selected the local university as it would be the most convenient for him. He also has siblings that attended the same one and felt it would be the obvious choice. He lives at home with his family and is happy to do so rather than living in student accommodation due to the expense of student life.

Participant 14

Sarah-Jane is a non-local student from Newcastle, aged 19. She is very enthusiastic about this new chapter in her life. Her family are helping her out financially so she is not particularly concerned about finances and is looking forward to the advantages of studying in the capital city. She is the youngest of her siblings and the last to go to university so she feels she has plenty of support around.

Discussion of findings

The variation of experience

A clear message from the students of both institutions was the extent of the variation in their experiences of induction. Findings showed that the experience was heavily influenced by the factors of; degree type, mode of study, programme, school or department, staff attitudes/enthusiasm, level of social activities, organisation/linking of activities, presentation of information, topics covered, physical environment and how valued students were made to feel. Providing a good induction experience is key particularly in terms of student retention (Kantanis 2002) and therefore variations of experiences are still under achieving.

For example, the importance of the making the students feel belonging and valued by the institution is demonstrated by this one student reported that she was introduced to her personal tutor in induction week, providing her with an immediate source of support if required. In addition, the tutor was keen to know about her educational experiences prior to entering university and one particular tutor offered to look at her CV and was generally helpful and supportive. This gave the student a sense of value to the institution, a positive opinion of the staff member and of the university overall. As this provided the student with a positive view of the whole university they therefore felt more comfortable with their selection of institution. In stark comparison another student highlighted how the physical environment coupled with the presentation of information during the induction period had given him an immediate negative impression of the university. This student found that the majority of the presentations took place in lecture halls with uncomfortable seating, temperature

extremes and staff with wavering enthusiasm. It was clear that for these students things considered possibly minor or unfortunate by the university, were considered major by the students and influential in their overall impression of their chosen institution.

The purpose of induction

Another major theme highlighted was the clear difference of opinion between students, in comparison to the institution, concerning the purpose of induction, in particular the areas and subjects which the students felt the induction period should include. For the institutions the purpose of induction is to register and integrate the student into the university, the culture and ethos, both academically and socially. However, the student's perceptions were predominantly socially orientated. Of the twenty-two students participating in the research, almost a third of the sample did not attend all of the induction sessions but instead, adopted an 'opt in or opt out' approach. These students said that the induction did not appear to be compulsory and therefore only attended the session of most interest to them. Adopting this casual manner in attendance has numerous implications for the students' experience in terms of bonding with peers, finding out all of the necessary information, some possibly vital to the first year experience, understanding the different elements that impact upon student life often of which students are unaware of.

Those participants with this lassie-faire approach were mainly students from the local area. Their locality and familiarity with the institution proved a key reason in their decision to attend or not. The reasons given for choosing to 'opt in or out' to the full induction week was because of their perception of the purpose of the induction and they believed they were local based students they were already considerably informed about the area and campus and could therefore 'skip a few talks'. The reasons given for this are that they expected to already know what the induction was to cover. They believed that it would consist primarily of registration, learning about key campus information and resources; meeting members of staff from the department, information about the programme make–up, the local area and social activities. As these local students were already familiar with the local area and in some cases the campus, many felt attending all of it would not be of any benefit. This group of students also indicated that some sessions were missed, as they were not deeply

concerned about forming new friendships as they were entering the university with established friendships that were too entering the same institution, for some even onto the same programme. For those entering on their own or from a considerable distance away the induction period was seen as a key time to establish friendships and networks, as is heavily encouraged by research concerning factors encouraging student persistence (Parmar and Trotter 2005). For those that selected to attend only particular induction sessions another reason for doing so was because it was not viewed as an essential part of the course and merely seen as the '*social run up to university starting*'.

These quotes demonstrate some of the views expressed by the students when describing what they perceive the induction period to consist of:

> *'I see freshers' week as settling us in before the works starts. It*
> *Gives us a week to find our feet.'*

> *'…Induction week is the easing in time…no work goes on here*
> *It's more about making sure everything's sorted like the paperwork*
> *And fees and stuff, before the work starts.'*

Those non-local students based from outside of the London region, feelings of disadvantage were expressed as they were aware that they had additional concerns of adjusting to new surroundings and a new area in additional to the apprehensions of the academic transition to university. For example, one student reported that she stayed in her room for three days as there was such a one gap in her induction timetable and she did not know what else to do. This heightened state of concern was also demonstrated by non-local students commenting upon how an induction sessions held for international students being given a tour of London would have been helpful to for students. Evidently home students experience similar levels of isolation, vulnerability and disconnectedness.

Levels of satisfaction

Meeting expectations

The level of satisfaction experienced by the students was generally positive. However, students were dissatisfied in certain areas, primarily the administrational aspect of the enrolment and pre-enrolment procedures and the ways in which information were given to them. Overall the students were generally satisfied with the amount of information given to them about their course and the services available to them from the university, but some felt different methods would be more effective. As demonstrated by the participants' responses about their thoughts on the level and depth of information provided by the university during the induction period:

> *'Yeah, it was fine. We did get a lot of information but we do, don't*
> *We cause we're at the beginning and we need to know what's out there.'*

> *'It was a lot to take in at one time but It's useful to just keep it and*
> *Read it when we need it.'*

 Other specific positive experiences were also mentioned, for example *lecture zero* in induction week giving students a 'taster' of what to expect in terms of style, format and level of teaching, as demonstrated below. This could include attending a lecture, developing note taking skills or introductory learning to the topic, in order for students to feel more comfortable with what to expect.

> *' I was really nervous about what to expect in the lessons.*
> *I found the first lesson, lesson zero reassuring…I think they*
> *Were probably going easy on us it being the first teaching but*
> *It gave a better idea of what to expect'.*

It is important to note that the lecture zero approach was campus and programme specific. As such, not all of the new students would have had the opportunity to experience some academic teachings within the induction period. The students in the current study reported different levels of satisfaction with the induction process. In some cases this was linked to academic departments; clearly some departments were better at inducting new students than others.

The balance between the academic and social activities is extremely important in easing the transition for the new students (Morgan 2005). For many of these students it is the first time they have lived outside of the family home and possibly moved to a new town or city. This is therefore often an unsettling time and therefore the ease and smoothness of the transition is key to retaining students, in both easing them into academic life and helping them to foster friendships. This is especially important for part-time students or those local based students that have then tendency to attend lessons and then return home, missing that socialising experience. All of the induction programmes looked at had included social activities within them, but for some the balance between the administrative elements, the academic aspects and the social activities was far more 'student friendly'.

> *'Yes, I think the university got it right, we got all of the information*
> *And registering over with but there were also outings and get togethers*
> *We could go on.'*

Distinct differences/similarities between institutions

Key differences noted between the institutions were the dissatisfactions that were expressed. For the sample of students at Middlesex University the most common complaint involved the organisation procedure of the induction week. Issues that provoked complaints were queuing and administrative information and procedures. For those students that were not experiencing straight forward enrolments (i.e. fee queries) students felt that there should have been greater levels of staffing on hand for these initial few weeks, rather than waiting and causing greater concern at an already anxious time.

Many of the students taking part in this research mentioned that evening and weekend activities were on the whole not included in the timetabled sessions, which was seen as a disappointment for some. Although the weekend and evenings gave the opportunity for informal bonding with housemates or peers, for less confident students it was seen as a time that could be very isolating and lonely, therefore structured activities would have been preferred.

'I felt very lonely, especially in the evenings. I didn't particularly
Know the people I was living with at that stage and I didn't
Know if I liked them. There wasn't enough time to get to know
each other.'

Another distinct issue was the divide of the local verses the non-local experience. Of this sample the majority would be considered local students and for these students the experience appeared less daunting than for students moving to the area from further afield. For those students considered local the induction period was viewed very differently that to those that had to cope with learning about the area, travel issues, forming friendships and becoming aware of university services and information. It was also clear to see that some of the perceptions about the university from those local students were actually incorrect or out of date and they did in fact need all of the information as much as the non-local students and it was evident that the institution would have to do more to stress the importance of induction for all students.

In contrast to Middlesex students, Brunel students generally felt that administrative issues were dealt with efficiently. For example, the introduction of on-line registration for returning students resulted in shorter queues and more staff readily available to handle face-to-face queries. However, part-time students felt less satisfied as meetings were often arranged at times when it would have been difficult for them to reschedule work commitments. The student army of student contacts (student ambassadors) came in for a lot of praise for providing vital information and support in the first few days and the student union presentations were well received. The attraction of information being presented to students in a fast moving, colourful, and loud manner is clearly a method that appeals to students. Problems identifies included the concerns of the focus of audience for the induction. Mature students expressed concerns about induction focusing on the needs of 18 year olds straight from school and issues relating to mature students seemed to get very little attention.

'I am a single parent with a mortgage, If I hadn't bumped into
our widening participation officer, I would not have known that
I would get help with my huge community charge bill as a full time student'.

Mature students disappointed with the induction sessions offered was also reflected in the curriculum offered. Full time students have a large range of modules to choose from. However, part time students are limited to the range of modules that are being taught when they can attend the university. It is important to note that Brunel offers few courses during the evenings and at weekends. A student reported that:

> *'These induction times are ridiculous, I have already asked*
> *my boss for more time off that she is happy to give and I haven't*
> *even started the course yet.'*

Timings of the induction and courses timetables at Brunel did not appear to consider most part time students would not be able to attend. Clearly the institution needs to consider age and course appropriate induction as the way forward.

On the issue of face to face and 'chalk and talk' style of delivery of inductions, students felt these to be the least effective. In communicating vital information, these sessions were often delivered by a middle-aged officer or academic, often with limited presentation skills, intent on conveying large amounts of information. Most students stated that those sessions were dull uninspiring and far too long and contained far too much information:

> *'Most students, I know fell asleep or walked'*

In contrast the student union president began each talk by honking a horn and playing a fast moving loud video for a few minutes. This certainly held the students attention and when asked which presentation the students found the most informative and enjoyable? – The student union presentation won hands down. Most students from Brunel had different complaints about some of their experiences. The overwhelming majority of students in the current study reported that they received sufficient information regarding courses and central support services during the induction week. However, further investigation revealed that this had more to do with the fact that in their view they had received large amounts of information about everything and were suffering from information overload. This was demonstrated by the fact that students

were unaware of the location of the counselling service, how to make a complaint or how to access the Hardship Fund.

Although all students attended presentations given by academic departments not all these presentations included information on central services. Interestingly, it was those students who read the information that appeared to know more about the central services than students who attended presentations. Students commented on the wide range of presentation styles, which in some cases resulted in students admitting to 'switching off' and in other cases students leaving the lecture hall before the presentation was over. Even though most of the students found the induction week useful – some felt the information could have been presented in a different manner, for example, via a website, mentors and plasma screens located around the university.

Young and mature students stated how expectations of HE were very high only for these to be dashed by poor customer care. Frequent room changes left large groups of students missing out on important 'one-off' sessions.

Conclusion

Conclusions and recommendations

This research highlights that there were a number of assumptions made by both universities. Firstly, that everyone arriving at the university had the same information needs, when clearly age, familiarity with London, mode of study as well as living location all influenced the type of information the new student required.

Secondly, a key mismatch appears to be the purpose if induction for students and these two HEIs. There appears to be more work required by institutions to identify the needs that current students entering HE with and to try to meet those needs in order to provide a positive early student experience. There is also a definite need for institutions to convey to the students the purpose of induction from their perspective in order for students to understand why and how these induction sessions are of use to them, to personalise the sessions to the use of the students.

Thirdly, the notion of the induction process should be extended, rather than concentrated into one week. The findings of the current study demonstrate that students' information needs exceed the five-day period allocated to inducting new students implying that the popular term 'induction week' to be inaccurate and unrealistic. Research carried out at Paisley University, Knox and McGillivray (2003), Tate 2005 clearly states that induction begins with the first enquiry made by students to study at the university and should extend throughout the first few weeks or indeed the term/semester. Bush and Little (1997) state that "induction encompasses all that is development and is not just information sharing – it is a multi-dimensional process". Tate (2005) states that transition is an elastic idea whereas 'induction week' is not. He argues further that post admissions support is about transition into and through university and that we must think of the needs of specific groups such as Access students, disabled students, mature students and clearing students.

Information sharing was also by far the most important purpose of induction and that paper based and stand-up presentations were the only methods appropriate. Students however expected the induction period to be about socialisation, familiarisation, orientation and confidence building and that this could be done using a variety of different methods. Crooks (1997) argues that "While some institutions maintain they are unable to invest the time and effort necessary to improve the overall experience (and information available) to parents, others have come to realise that they can no longer afford not to".

Institutions must address administrative issues in order to make them more efficient, effective and accurate. Students expected more organisations and were astounded by the lack of it. Clements (2004) states that all students have a right to be safe and free to learn. It is evident that with some universities with record withdrawal rates and all universities being judged by the number of student they retain, universities are no longer able to ignore the fact that they will seldom be given a second chance to make a good impression on first year students.

This research also supports other research (Yorke, 2001) in highlighting hat good quality information and experience of university is vital in order that students have realistic expectations of what lies ahead. Research carried out by the Cook (2003)

conducting the STAR project at Ulster University shows that most students who drop out of university do so because they have harboured "false expectations of university".

The overwhelming evidence from the current study suggests that there is a need to make the induction period smoother in terms of ease of registration, more effective information giving and far more value placed upon the student in order to meet the needs of students and provided them with a positive experience. A key source for providing this information is by utilising our most valuable resource – the students! Previous research shows new students often place considerable value on the advice from other students who have gone through the experiences first hand, therefore by having existing students speak to first years can be a very valuable and reassuring exercise and smooth some of the process voiced in this research.

In conclusion there is the need for internal research for HEIs to evaluate and reflect upon their practice and induction period considering the developments in HE, especially over the last decade. The findings reported in this paper should further help in developing appropriate university induction strategies.

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