

Fellowship Snapshot: Exploring links between
induction, exit and retention (ELIXIR)

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Project Overview

This project was motivated by a wish to understand and improve student retention rates across the University, and to complement other initiatives that were focusing on inclusive education and student success, including Nina Wardleworth's work on decolonising the curriculum and Bridgette Bewick's project on student belonging.

By taking better account of each student's context and needs we can support the creation of communities of practice that help students develop academic literacy – such as understanding feedback – and interpret the nuances of retention data. This in turn enables us to recognise and celebrate diversity, rather than perpetuate deficit ideas that focus on what students 'lack' when they come to university.

Understanding each student's individual journey into university and identifying different processes of transition are now recognised as important steps that affect each person's success during their time at university, however 'success' is defined. It is widely recognised that universities need to support students throughout these transitions, and this project sought to contribute to this understanding and to improve both local and institutional induction processes.

A key premise of the exploration of this critical issue is that induction is a process, not an event. It is crucial not to regard the beginning of academic engagement as time-limited, nor to inadvertently create a situation where students are overloaded with new information they are unable to contextualise or process. Students' learning needs to be set in individualised contexts that support transition, rather than regimented schedules that have to be endured. Induction can be far less effective when the diversity of student needs is not met, or perhaps not even considered. With this in mind, the project aimed to explore which induction practices work and for whom, in what circumstances, and why.

Project Objectives

- Review the literature on *student retention, students' reasons for leaving, and effective induction practices*
- Provide an overview of induction practices to stakeholders in Leeds, focusing on current approaches at Leeds and elsewhere
- Explore ways to house induction resources in a single location and find a way to embed them in consistent practice across the university
- Draw together and build upon work that has already been undertaken at Leeds, for example in the MATIE project and by the PGT Offer working group
- Identify an induction lead in each school and create an Induction Network, where practice is shared and developed through regular communication across faculties

Methodology

The project had a research phase and a transformative phase that ran concurrently.

The research phase was grounded in a review of literature on welcome, induction and transition. A Lego serious play workshop yielded insights on student perceptions of



induction, and students' experience of induction were explored further by twenty-one semi-structured student interviews from diverse student categories.

The transformative phase involved meeting staff from across the university, including all faculties and professional services. Initially, this activity was aimed at understanding how induction works at Leeds, but it quickly became a vehicle for dissemination of our emerging ideas. LITE organised two university-wide workshops to help facilitate this process. We also held in-depth workshops with two Schools to explore their existing practice and explore scope for improvement.

The transformative aspect was supercharged by our invitation to help lead the University WIT (Welcome, Induction and Transition) project.

Key findings

- Induction practices at Leeds vary considerably in terms of goals, content, organisational roles and responsibilities
- Induction has typically been approached as a short process of information transmission, with only limited consideration of broader psycho-social needs of our students
- Interviews with students demonstrated that student expectations of university are formed via several channels and they vary enormously; they are often very different from how the institution and its staff perceive them
- The interviews also showed that students are wrestling with the notion of independence, as individuals and as learners
- There is no typical student journey, even where students appear to be similar or are members of a distinct cohort

Outcomes

We held two LITE workshops, one in October 2019 with 40 attendees and one in May 2020, with 97 participants. The workshop in 2020 reflected the shift in the project that resulted from the global pandemic and focused on induction online. We created two blog posts that reflected on these events and on our wider thinking, with the first of these recommending a possible end to freshers' week, and the second explaining the importance of getting induction right from the start. In other dissemination activities we led a LITE Journal Club session and ran a stand at January's Student Education Conference, at which we invited colleagues to show us how to build the best induction from a broad range of context-driven viewpoints.

The global pandemic led us to a point where the main outcomes of the project sprang far outside its own boundaries, and we were invited to play a leading role in the creation of the University's Welcome, Induction and Transition resource (WIT). ELIXIR's nascent work contributed to the strategic overview of WIT and included the recognition and adoption of several of ELIXIR's key principles. In particular, we led on the creation of the student journey maps that underpinned the design of the institutional online resource *Getting Started at Leeds*.

Andrew Mearman is now leading the evaluation of WIT, informing a proposal accepted at the University Taught Student Education Board to run WIT again in 2021, and represents the



institutional WIT resource as a key member of the university's ePortfolio Implementation Group.

Ruth Payne is now Academic Lead for the university's ePortfolio project, as well as leading on a workstream that is embedding Sense of Belonging at Leeds. Each of these projects feeds directly into Induction and student retention.

The impact of our ELIXIR project promises to be substantial and permanent.

Challenges

The project attracted a great deal of interest and colleagues were eager to speak to us. It emerged that some colleagues saw us as potential advocates or change agents, which was pleasing and also highlighted the gaps in current processes.

It was more difficult than planned to find student participants, meaning we conducted fewer interviews than we had hoped, and our sample conformed less to our theoretical vision and become more one of convenience.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the plan for the second half of the project, but it clearly also gave the project momentum. We were invited to join the WIT team and were very pleased to be involved right from the start.

Some of the project's original goals and outcomes had to be set aside, because workshops and conferences were cancelled during the pandemic.

Next steps

The ELIXIR project is contributing to wider cultural change at Leeds through both the evaluation of the institutional WIT resource and through the introduction of the university's new ePortfolio. The principles identified by ELIXIR, including the importance of developing students' sense of belonging, viewing induction as an ongoing process, and focusing on the complexities of transition are becoming part of business as usual at the University of Leeds.

Our postponed presentation to the European First Year Experience conference in Aarhus will take place in June 2021, and we plan to publish our work in the conference's associated journal.

All that really remains for the ELIXIR team is to try to banish the term 'induction week'.

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