

Evaluation of the Welcome, Induction and Transition 2020 project: Summary Report

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Project Overview

In response to the ongoing Covid-19 crisis a working group, known as the WIT (Welcome, Induction, Transition) Team, commissioned by the Taught Student Education Board, created a set of new online, dedicated induction resources for new starters in the academic year 2020/21 and complementary materials for returning students. Collectively, these resources demonstrated a recognition that the university to which students were returning was operating differently. The terms of reference for the WIT project asked the project team to:

- To evaluate the success and impact of the online welcome, induction and transition delivered in 2020.
- To make recommendations for ongoing institutional provision and oversight of welcome, induction and transition activity beyond the 2020/21 academic session.

Project Objectives

The WIT team identified a set of objectives for the project, mostly focused on the resources used but also on bringing about cultural change. These can be summarised thus:

- To oversee the development of an online welcome, induction and transition programme suitable for all incoming undergraduate (UG) and taught postgraduate (PGT) students.
- To coordinate activity between professional services and faculties in the delivery of a coherent and inclusive welcome, induction and transition experience for incoming students.
- To define roles and responsibilities across academic and professional services roles regarding the delivery of welcome, transition and induction, including the role of Directors of Student Education, Personal Tutors and Programme Leaders.
- To develop a common framework for welcome, induction and transition at the University, including guiding principles and minimum expectations.
- To identify all existing resources available to support welcome, induction and transition, and to oversee the collation of these resources together with the development of any additional resources required to provide a coherent online welcome, induction and transition experience for incoming students.
- To oversee the development and delivery of templates for school-specific activity to support welcome, induction and transition, and training and ongoing support for schools in delivering that activity online, in an inclusive way, meeting the needs of diverse groups of students.
- To evaluate the success and impact of the online welcome, induction and transition delivered in 2020.



- To make recommendations for ongoing institutional provision and oversight of welcome, induction and transition activity beyond the 2020/21 academic session.
- To ensure connections are made between welcome, induction and transition and pre-arrival activity and communications.

Methods

Based on the objectives of WIT, the evaluation seeks to address three main questions:

- A. Have the resources been effective, including reaching different groups of students? If not, how can they be improved?
- B. Has the approach to and processes of welcome and induction changed? If so, how?
- C. If the resources and approach and processes are effective and hence worth keeping, how could the process of creating, disseminating and embedding it have been improved?

For our analysis, we used data collected by the WIT team, often using convenience and snowballing sampling approaches. In addition, colleagues around the University shared data they had collected in their normal roles. These data are qualitative and quantitative; thus, the evaluation is the product of the mixing of data types from multiple sources. The evaluation process was informed by the principles of realist evaluation in the sense that the evaluation attempted to i) capture the diversity of the Leeds student body and ii) elucidate the mechanisms that have led to outcomes we describe. However, it should be clarified that whilst the evaluation reflects this tradition it does not conform to a typical realist evaluation.

Key findings

Overall, it should be said that the WIT Project was one of wide scope, being the creation of a set of resources – a big enough project in itself – and an institution-wide programme of cultural change. It is agreed that the project achieved a great deal in a short time, representing in many ways an exemplar of cross-institutional partnership working.

The principles of WIT and the overall quality and robustness of the resource were supported by our evaluation, and their overall usage was satisfactory for a new resource (46% of undergraduates and 38% of postgraduates who could have accessed the Getting Started at Leeds (GSAL) online resource did so).

Around this mean, there were significant differences between students with different fee statuses: EU students used UG GSAL most, followed by Home, then International Students



least of all. Data collected on selected faculties indicated that students in the 'least' and 'most deprived' student cohorts accessed the resource least.

Further, significant differences in usage rates were found between students in different faculties, suggesting different degrees of embeddedness of GSAL in welcome planning. This was also reflected in the fact that engagement with different modules tended to be at the beginning of each of the sections and tailed off as the module progressed (see Figure 1). Patterns of student usage also suggest that student-created material is more popular, as well as other material that connects students to IT systems, to staff and to peers.

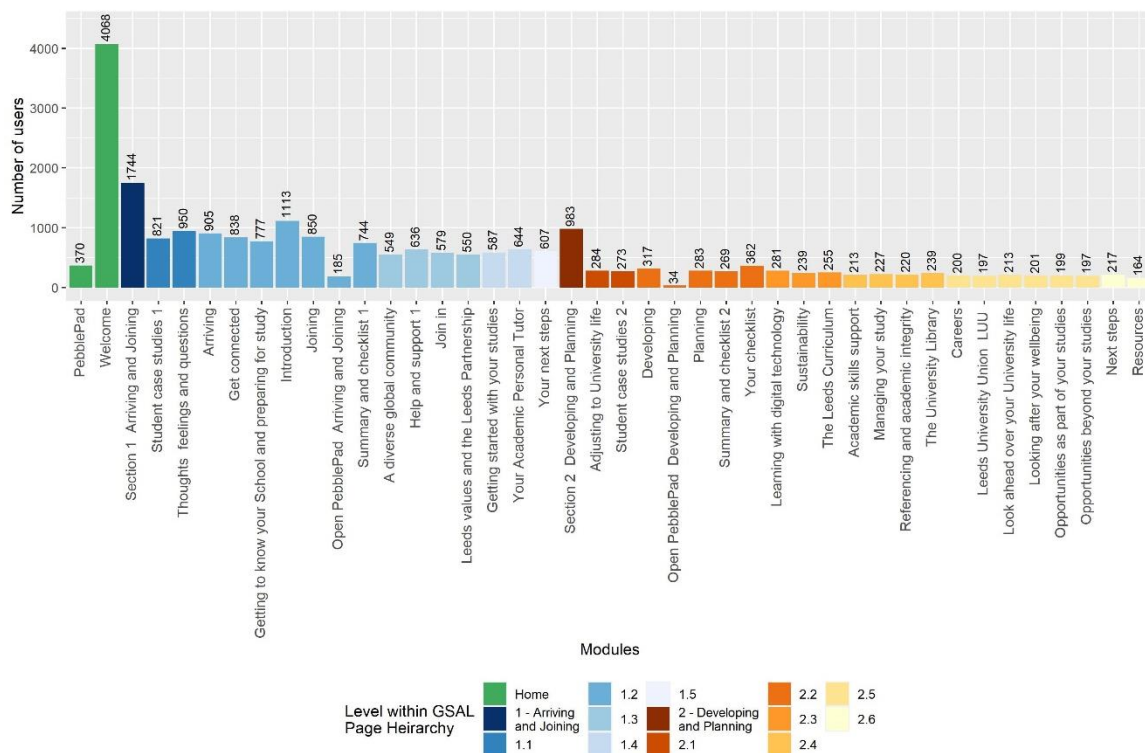


Figure 1: Percentage of users of UG GSAL that accessed each module. (Data source: Minerva [VLE] usage data)

Data collected in a survey by JISC and our own survey suggested that students liked the resources. Overall, 61% of students rated the GSAL resources as at least good, a figure similar to student ratings of longer-established resources such as IT induction. The modal score for the usefulness of Transition to Leeds (T2L) was 4 on all questions. Again, a key reason for non-engagement with T2L was reported as not knowing about it.

Other resources that supported WIT, such as the Study Success Resource and Prepare for Postgrad also reported satisfaction and improved confidence but reported low usage rates, and like GSAL, usage tailed off after the initial period.

Overall, students reported a generally positive experience of welcome and induction, particularly given the circumstances. A student experience and wellbeing survey found 41 per cent of respondents at least agreeing they were satisfied with 2020/21 welcome and induction, and 45 per cent of students felt welcomed into the year. Beyond this, 81 per cent of respondents to an a welcome survey of international students at Leeds were positive about their arrival experience.

It is clear from our data that embedding the resource into welcome planning and beyond, positive messages that nudged students to participate, and timely messaging to staff about WIT resources are all likely to increase student engagement with the WIT resources.

Despite efforts by the project team to avoid too much information being delivered via too many channels, students communicated that they were still somewhat confused and overloaded, with information coming via too many channels.

A key issue in 2020/21 was that staff responsible for WIT in their schools felt that communication to them about GSAL and other aspects of WIT arrived too late for them to build them into their planning. Nonetheless, staff surveyed broadly supported the general thrust of WIT and agreed that they had changed their practice and approach to WIT.

Implications and recommendations

Project management/project mode is necessary from the start. It was recognised both during WIT and during T2L that having a dedicated project manager role had made an essential difference to ways of working and to the efficacy of the project. This has already been incorporated into WIT21 but raises questions about the future organisation of WIT and suggests the need for a permanent WIT team.

Earlier communications to staff about the resources – including earlier sight of them – to help staff embed the resources into their practice. This is being incorporated into the communications plan for WIT21. Indeed, it was already recognised when T2L began. Note that the decision to switch to PebblePad for 2021 was driven partly by its allowing staff more easily to see it than was the case with Minerva.

Simplified communications to staff and to students, who complained of information overload despite its avoidance being a key objective of WIT. Students were fairly forgiving but wanted better communications. This was incorporated into the communications plan for WIT21.

Greater differentiation between resources, particularly in terms of the messaging used thereby meeting the different needs of different types of students. This applies to UG and



PGT but also within these groups, to help more effectively reach international and under-represented groups. It is important to recognise when overly general assumptions are made and to eliminate these.

Greater emphasis on Transition, considering that welcome and induction is only a short part of the student journey and that moving between years is also a challenging transformative moment. This is particularly the case when students have experienced university during a traumatic period: any typical assumptions made about their transition must be abandoned.

A more dynamic resource, utilising more video and interactive content and stressing student testimonies. For example, the WIT resource as a One-stop-shop, or a set of dynamic checklists. These aspects are already central to the design of the new WIT21 resource in Pebble Pad.

The creation of a permanent WIT Network to facilitate better sharing of information and best practice examples, the latter being underused in WIT20. Both elements have already been designed into WIT21.

Engage with students even earlier, consistent with literature about pre-arrival activities. This engagement could most usefully be done by programme team members, academic personal tutors, and peer mentors, via student ambassador or Peer Assisted Study Support (PASS).

Challenges

Due to time pressure, the evaluation process was not embedded fully into the design of WIT resources, meaning we were unable to get all the data we needed and instead relied on a combination of collected and 'found' data, which collectively led to our being unable to answer some of the questions posed. Moreover, limitations on the extent of *ex-post* data gathering arose from real difficulties in getting useful analytic or management information from the University's student education and other systems, which are not necessarily designed with analysis in mind, nor to 'speak' to each other. Thus, the mechanisms to use these data are highly labour intensive, and therefore not necessarily cost-effective. The evaluation cannot, therefore:

- Establish routes taken by students into the WIT resources and out to other resources
- Assess the effect of WIT on overall experience/outcome/sense of belonging for students
- Make definitive judgements on student usage or the quality of the resource



Next steps

A final recommendation of the WIT20 project was that its evaluation needs to be articulated clearly and embedded into the design of WIT21. Accordingly, again following principles of realist evaluation (and the related theories of change literature) the evaluation will attempt to capture:

- 1) usage of the WIT resource,
- 2) views of the students about the resource, and
- 3) related outcome measures such as sense of belonging.

Further, it will do so over the life of the resource and explore differences between students by location and archetype, again aiming to explain to what extent engagement with the resource connects to engagement and belonging, for which students, and why. Crucially, the data to answer these questions will be primarily embedded within the resource itself, via pop up questions and short surveys, rather than relying on convenience-sampled external data. This process must be facilitated by improvements to data infrastructure that would allow, for instance, longitudinal studies of individual student journeys.

