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Induction by Design: Strategically supporting student transition into higher education

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Induction by Design: Strategically supporting student transition into higher education

This qualitative study reports on an on-entry induction and socialisation intervention designed to support and retain students transitioning to higher education at an Irish private higher education institution. Following the intervention, a qualitative study was conducted with the aim of exploring new undergraduate student experiences of transitioning to higher education and their experiences of participating in the induction by design. Six themes emerged during the analytical process: academic experiences, expectations of higher education, the impact of college on life, induction by design, socialisation and the transition from school to college. Findings indicate that designed induction interventions which focus on the on-entry phase of the study lifecycle can have a positive impact on new higher education students.

Keywords: Student success, transition, induction, higher education, orientation, retention

Introduction

Retaining students and supporting transition into higher education are key issues facing higher education institutions. A recent study on progression in Irish higher education conducted by the Irish Higher Education Authority found that an average of 14% of

new undergraduate entrants failed to progress to the second year of their programme (HEA 2018). In addition, 27% of new undergraduates studying level 6 and level 7 undergraduate courses did not progress to their second year (HEA 2018). High levels of attrition among first year university students is a trend worldwide (Whitehead 2012). In an Irish private higher education institution, retention and progression of first year undergraduate students was highlighted as an area of concern. In response to this, a new on-entry induction and socialisation plan was designed and implemented, which is informed by research on student success and transition to higher education. Following the induction by design intervention, a qualitative study captured the narratives of first year students who had participated.

Literature review

Why do students withdraw?

Research on university student withdrawal has been underway for over forty years, and began in the US when high non-completion rates of nearly 50% became a concern (Yorke and Longden 2004) The factors which cause student withdrawal from university are according to Yorke (1999) and Jones (2008); having chosen the wrong course, academic difficulties, financial issues, a negative student experience and challenges with the social aspects of university. During the first year, there are a range of difficulties encountered by students. These issues, also known as the 'roots of attrition' include managing time, study workload, course or family expectations, financial strain, conflict between family and life commitments, navigation an unfamiliar university system, becoming an independent learner (Brooker, Brooker, Lawrence, 2017).

A number of the factors which contribute to student withdrawal are not attributable to the student but rather to the institution (Cook 2009). Moving from the controlled environment of school to being an independent learner in university can cause new students anxiety and distress (Lowe and Cook 2003; Pennington et al. 2018). As a result, institutional retention programmes have become prevalent in the last decade and can have a positive impact on student transition when they address the 'roots of attrition' outlined above (Cuseo 2002; Cook 2009; Jones 2008).

The literature on transition and retention suggests that students are most likely to withdraw during the first year of university (Jones 2008; Yorke 1999; Cook 2009). Therefore, if students are actively supported during their transition to university they are more likely to develop the skills required to progress successfully to the second year of their programme (Thomas 2012; Thomas et al. 2017; Pennington et al. 2018). Additionally, research conducted by Murtagh et al. (2017) indicates the importance of attendance at induction to students first year attainment.

Strategies to Promote Student Success

The literature indicates that institutional approaches to orientation and learner agency have an impact on student transitions to higher education (Bowles and Brindle 2017; Khau 2011). Taking a strategic institutional approach to student transition can positively impact on transition experiences and retention (Brunton et al. 2016; Thomas 2012; Thomas et al. 2017). Jones (2008) found that students can feel stronger commitment to their courses and are more likely to persist if there is a strong student-institution and programme match, good preparation prior to entry, minimal financial issues or personal difficulties, a satisfactory academic experience, and opportunities for

meaningful social integration in the early stages of the academic year. At the institutional level, there should be high-level responsibility for nurturing a culture of belonging and creating the necessary infrastructure to promote student engagement, retention and success (Brunton et al. 2017; Thomas 2012; Thomas et al. 2017).

In order to actively support student transition to university, an induction/orientation programme which actively promotes two key elements: academic readiness and social readiness are crucial to student success (Cook 2009, Lowe and Cook 2003; Hussey and Smith 2010). Orientation activities to promote academic readiness should foster in students realistic expectations of their academic workload, and their responsibilities as independent learners (Yorke and Longden 2004; Cook and Rushton 2009; Vihavainen et al. 2013). In addition, induction academic readiness activities should proactively raise awareness of university support services such as the library (Soria et al. 2013; Hurst and Leonard 2007; Tinto 2017). Further, raising awareness of university level study skills and independent learning habits is an important academic readiness message that students should receive during orientation (Cook et al. 2005; Mery, Newby and Peng 2012; Lear, Li and Prentice 2016).

Social readiness can be encouraged during the transition period by fostering a sense of belonging and giving students opportunities for social interaction which can have a positive impact on retention (Cook et al. 2005; Yorke and Longden 2004; Thomas 2012; Bowles and Brindle 2017; Hughes and Smail 2014; Tinto 2017) Orientation activities should foster social interaction between peers and between students and academics (Cook et al. 2005; Thomas 2012; Thomas et al. 2017).

Involving senior students in induction as student mentors is beneficial for providing role models for new students (Lowe and Cook 2003; Thomas 2012; Thomas et al. 2017)

Induction by Design

In addition to the academic and social readiness activities discussed above, a physical orientation of the university campus is beneficial to new students (Yorke and Longden 2004, Cook, Rushton, McCormick and Southall 2005). Further, research conducted by Murtagh et al. (2017) indicates the importance of attendance at induction to students' first year attainment. Induction by Design

Drawing on the student success literature discussed above, a new induction by design on-entry approach was developed at the private higher education institution. This was developed in response to institutional concerns over the retention and progression of first year undergraduate students.

The previous approach to induction was process orientated, fitting in with an efficient registration schedule, and consequently it was limited to approximately an hour in duration. While some important induction and socialisation activities took place, the limited time did not allow for other induction activities. There was also a period of time for most students, when they moved from their registration room to their induction room, and had to wait until the rest of that student group had registered before the induction could begin. This waiting period was perceived by the academic staff as having a detrimental effect on the students during the subsequent induction.

The new induction by design sought to address the shortcomings identified above and to strategically promote student success through a carefully crafted set of induction and socialisation activities which were shaped by the literature outlined above

and were particularly influenced by the University of Ulster's Student Transition And Retention (STAR) projects' Guidelines for the Management of Student Transition (Cook, Rushton, McCormick and Southall 2005)

The new induction was a two-day event, the first day comprised of registration and a short welcome and the second day was a full day of induction activities (See table 1 below). The induction by design aimed to foster and develop social and academic readiness for new undergraduate students and to create an open and welcoming environment. The social readiness activities were: a welcome talk, team building, meet student mentors, scavenger hunt, and a social event. The academic readiness activities were: study skills, library, careers & student services sessions, and an expectations activity. In addition, the scavenger hunt activity was a physical orientation of the campus.

Induction by Design Activities		
<i>Activity</i>	<i>Aim</i>	<i>Literature</i>
Welcome talk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Break the ice • Create a welcoming atmosphere 	Cook et. al. 2005
Team building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage socialisation with peers • Encourage socialisation between students and programme team staff 	Cook et. al. 2005 Thomas 2012; Thomas et al. 2017; Yorke and Longden 2004; Bowles and Brindle 2017; Hughes and Smail 2014; Tinto 2017
Study skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make students aware that there are tools they need to have in order to succeed in their education goals • Academic readiness 	Cook et al. 2005; Mery Newby and Peng 2012; Lear, Li and Prentice 2016

Library, careers & student services talk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise awareness about college support services 	Soria et al. 2013; Hurst and Leonard 2007; Tinto 2017
Meet student mentors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide positive role models for the new students to emulate • Provide opportunity for peer support 	Lowe and Cook 2003; Thomas 2012; Thomas et al. 2017
Scavenger hunt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical orientation of campus • Encourage team building and socialisation 	Yorke and Longden 2004; Cook, Rushton, McCormick and Southall 2005; Thomas 2012; Thomas et al. 2017
Expectations activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide learners with a positive set of expectations that the organisation has for them • Academic readiness 	Yorke and Longden 2004; Cook and Rushton 2009; Vihavainen et al. 2013
Social event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage socialisation between students, academic staff and peer mentors 	Cook et al. 2005; Thomas 2012; Thomas et al. 2017

Table 1. Induction by Design Activities

The induction sessions were led by academic staff who were teaching on the degree programmes relevant to the students they were interacting with. Academics were briefed and received a training session on the aims of the new induction and their roles.

Methodology

A qualitative study was designed with the aim of exploring new undergraduate student experiences of participating in the induction by design intervention and to explore their experiences of transitioning to higher education. The study was framed by the following

research question: *How does a designed induction intervention impact on student narratives of transition into higher education?*

Eight participants consented to take part in the study, two male and six female. Participants were aged 18-19, were all school leavers and the majority lived with their parents. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. An interview schedule was designed which contained twenty-seven questions related to starting college, taking part in induction activities, socialisation, studying, the impact of college and plans for the future. The interviews were conducted during the first six weeks of the academic year.

The analytical approach taken for the study was thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) model. Thematic analysis was an appropriate method as it is a flexible and rich way to report patterns in qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2013). The interviews were transcribed and coded using Nvivo. Candidate themes were refined and reviewed through an iterative process for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Braun and Clarke 2006). After a number iterations of reviewing and refining, a thematic diagram was created and each theme defined and named. Themes constructed through the analytical process are discussed in the findings below.

Findings

The findings of this study show that the socialisation activities had an impact on the students' narratives in relation to their transition to higher education. Six themes were constructed during the analytical process, they were: academic experiences, expectations of higher education, the impact of college on life, induction by design, socialisation and the transition from school to college, see figure 1 below.

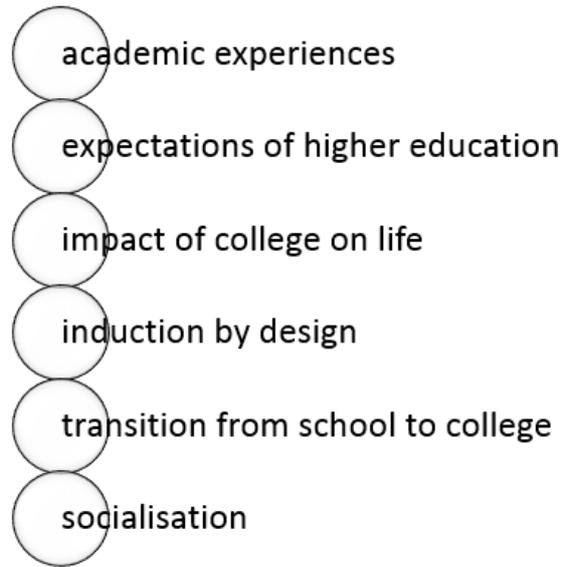


Figure 1. Thematic Map

Academic experiences

This theme explores participants' academic experiences during the first month of higher education. For some participants the induction intervention allayed social anxieties but did not their academic anxieties, '*induction took away the fear from the social side but it didn't do anything for the academic side*'. In their narratives, participants articulated anxieties about their ability to manage their academic workload and to produce academic assignments which met higher education standards.

'I feel like my level of work isn't up to the standard that the lecturers are expecting but I suppose that's just one of those things that gets in your head.'

(Participant A)

For some participants, they expressed anxiety around perceived criticism that they might receive in assignment feedback.

Expectations of higher education

Participants expectations of higher education are explored in this theme, in terms of their expectations of the institution and the institutions' expectations of them.

Participants perceived that the institution had high, day to day, expectations of them of the students in terms of attendance and completion of assignments to a high standard.

'Well like any college or school they expect me to participate, hand in assignments and do well. Like any kind of education, they are all going to expect you to hand in your assignments on time and show up to class.' (Participant F)

The institution was described as being of relatively smaller scale and as a consequence of smaller class sizes, they felt there was a more focused individual attention on them as students.

'you've got smaller classes, so because you've got smaller classes, they're more concerned with you, concerned with you getting an assignment rather than the whole class. As a whole, there's kind of more interest in the individuals, it's easier.' (Participant F)

Participants emphasized what the ideal student would be with regards to the institution's expectations, by describing students who don't match up to that ideal.

'I'd expect the students to not just be here, like I know so many people that go to college for the craic, and I go for the craic, but I do all my assignments I do my readings, I'm on top of it. People just go and they bunk off halfway through and then they go to the pub. I just can't understand people like that, especially here

paying the fees and then just doing that. Like I know some people in my class that would be rarely in and I can't understand.' (Participant C)

Participants perceived that the institution had high long term expectations of them for overall academic success.

'Just to give it your all, give it your best. Do something with your degree, well that's what I would expect if I was running a college.' (Participant C)

The participants appeared to be less able to articulate their expectation of the institution than the institution's expectation of them. The participants described having an expectation that the institution would facilitate social connection with others.

I: Is there anything else you expect from [institution]?

D: I suppose kind of meet new people and that kind of stuff' (Participant D)

Participants also had an expectation that institution would support them in becoming successful graduates.

'A degree, a job maybe. That's the case of play it by year and see where the future takes you. At the very least I hope this place can make me into a better person.' (Participant G)

Impact of College on Life

This theme captures the impact of attending college on other aspects of participants' lives such as financial, social and their own identity. A minority of participants described in their narratives a changing sense of their own identity as they began their higher education journey.

'I've grown a bit in my attitude and my approach to life. I realise I don't need to do what I did, I can't just put off all the work and I'll do it the day I go in, then I'll continuously have to work on it to improve myself.' (Participant A)

For some participants attending college has had a significant financial impact, resulting in pressure on themselves and their families, *'we ended up selling one of the cars, and eh I felt really guilty'*. This resulted in many participants taking up part time work to fund their higher education, *'I have three little part time jobs, they're all weird times so I had to re-arrange all them'*.

Participants described the challenges they faced balancing their pre-existing life, for example friendship groups or family routines, with their new college life.

'I'm busy, we're all busy. It's kind of the social aspect of my life it's flipped, it's done a 180 but instead of losing my friends and been alone I've made new friends and I'm trying to keep my old ones. It's just it's coming to that point where I don't see them as much as I want to. But we still text each other and call each other as much cause we don't want to forget each other.' (Participant, C)

Induction by Design

The impact of the induction by design intervention on the student narratives relating to their transition to higher education is explored in the following theme.

The physical orientation activity was reported positively by participants as a useful approach to familiarise themselves with the campus and as a socialisation opportunity to work as a team.

'We went around the place and took pictures of things it was like a treasure hunt or something like that. I think it was basically just a way to get to know the area and get to know people as well' (Participant, D)

For some participants, the information sessions provided by the college services at induction such as the library, careers and student services raised awareness of the services and how participants could seek supports in the future.

'The library talk? I like the.. I've been in the library a good few times, I know some people that haven't. I like the library and I thought the talk was very useful.' (Participant, C)

For other participants, the service information sessions made no impact on their awareness of college supports, *'Sorry but I couldn't make heads or tails, didn't know what she was talking about'*.

Having academics lead the induction sessions was perceived by participants as a valuable means of socialisation, and for communicating academic expectations and norms to the new students.

'Well I think the induction was a very good idea. It just gave us a feel of how we were setting up for the next, I don't know how ever many years. But it worked really well, I got talking to a few people. It's good to meet some of the lecturers and get some feedback from them on what's it going to be like' (Participant, G)

Interacting with peer mentors at the induction day was perceived as beneficial by participants, as the mentors gave the student perspective on college.

'Instead of just having staff talking to you, instead there is someone who is roughly your own level who can tell you about their own experiences'

The opportunity to socialise with peers and break the ice at the induction day was a positive impact of induction reported by participants. The on-entry socialisation activities encouraged students to interact with each other.

'But, I sat there for the first 20 minutes, sat on my own and I wouldn't talk to anybody, and you know it's supposed to be social and stuff. But I was so afraid to talk to anybody, but as we got given our tasks and given our team mates and switched around it was really good. I'm glad I went to it because if I hadn't, I don't think I would have been as clicky with my friends in the class now. So it really helped.' (Participant, A)

Socialisation

This theme captures the socialisation experiences of participants with their peers during

the on-entry induction phase and during the first month of college.

The initial on-entry socialisation with peers was described by participants as challenging and uncomfortable, *'again it was kind of awkward, it was good but it was awkward because you like didn't know anybody, didn't know where you were going.'* The socialisation activities, which were part of the induction, by design alleviated participants' social anxieties and enabled them engage socially with peers.

'Definitely, if had missed it I would have been the lost little sheep that I thought I was going to be, but the induction cleared away all that, you know? And set confidence to actually talk to people and make friends' (Participant, A)

Following the on-entry phase, participants reported that peer socialisation centred on classmates, and in clubs and societies in the first few weeks of the academic year.

'I have, I've made a few friends. I haven't made friends with a lot of people but a few people from class and then from drama society. So it was good to meet new people' (Participant, F)

For some participants, commuting long distances to college impacted on their opportunities for peer socialisation as they were not always able to participate in social activities based in the college.

'yeah I joined the film society, I haven't really went to anything yet because I live in Greystones. Things happen a while after I finish. It's all on a few hours after I finish lectures so I don't really want to hang around and head back to

Greystones late. (Participant, D)

Transition from School to College

This theme captures the transition experiences of participants from secondary school to higher education and their personal pathways to college, as well as their goals for the future.

Participant's descriptions of their pathways to college indicate that this private higher education institution and their current course were not their first preference but rather choices of circumstance.

'Well it was a bit of a rocky road along the way. I did my leaving cert first through XX College in XX, those were two pretty tough years. Then I applied for other universities but I didn't get the points. So then I decided I'd repeat in XX College and that was grand, I ended up getting the points. To tell you the truth this wasn't anyone near first choice, this was last on my list the back-up.'

(Participant, G)

Adapting to the independence of college learning was reported by some participants as a challenge when compared to the structured secondary school environment.

'It's more laid back than I expected it to be, that's been sticking out. But also on a kind of bad note, it's my own fault but you know in secondary school the way they spoon feed you the notes you know? I'm not used to making that leap if you

don't do the work you're falling down, we're not chasing you for it.'

(Participant, A)

In their narratives, participants articulate clear goals and aspirations for the future related to their intended completion of their degree.

I: Do you know what you want to do after your degree?

D: I have kind of an idea but I want to make sure. I'm hoping kind of journalism or teaching

I: Oh cool, if you had a picture in your head or where you want to be, what would that picture be like?

D: Well I'd love to be a sports journalist write about football because I love football' (Participant, D).

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to explore the impact of a designed induction intervention on student narratives of transition into higher education. The induction by design intervention was designed to foster the development of social and academic readiness for new undergraduate students. The findings suggest that a designed induction intervention can have a positive impact on student experiences of transitioning to higher education. In particular, the data indicated that the induction intervention had an impact on participant narratives of their academic experiences, their expectations of higher education, the impact of college on their lives, and their experiences of on-entry socialisation.

This study found that during the on-entry phase, participants articulated anxieties related to both the social and academic spheres, this is broadly in line with previous research conducted by Lowe and Cook (2003) and Brooker, Brooker, Lawrence (2017). However, one point of difference was that for some participants the induction by design intervention alleviated their social anxieties not their academic concerns.

The induction by design intervention facilitated participants in clarifying their goals and expectations of higher education. This finding indicates that such an intervention can facilitate the development of realistic expectations of higher education learning. The introduction of an induction by design as a targeted intervention in the early stages of participants' study lifecycle is supported by the literature on student success and retention (Brunton et al. 2016; Thomas 2012; Thomas et al. 2017).

The data revealed that attending college had an impact on other aspects of participants' lives such as financial, social and their own identity. Balancing competing demands presented challenges for participants. This finding is consistent with previous research on the difficulties that first year students can face carried out by Yorke (1999), Jones (2008), and Brooker, Brooker and Lawrence (2017).

This study found that the induction by design activities had a positive impact on student narratives about their transition to higher education. Induction activities such as the physical orientation and the library, careers, and student services sessions were described positively by participants, which indicates that the intervention achieved some

of its aim of raising awareness of support services and was consistent with the literature on designing effective inductions (Soria et al. 2013; Hurst and Leonard 2007; Tinto 2017; Yorke and Longden 2004; Cook et al. 2005; Thomas 2012; Thomas et al. 2017).

The data indicated that having academics lead the induction sessions was perceived by participants as a valuable means of socialisation, and for communicating academic expectations and norms to the new students. Further, this study found that interacting with peer mentors at the induction day was perceived as beneficial by participants, as the mentors gave the student perspective on college. These findings are supported by the literature on the impact of having positive academic and student role models for new students (Lowe and Cook 2003; Thomas 2012; Thomas et al. 2017; Cook et al. 2005)

The findings of this study indicate that the initial on-entry socialisation with peers was described by participants as challenging and uncomfortable. The socialisation activities which were part of the induction by design alleviated participants' social anxieties and enabled them engage socially with peers. This finding suggests that the intervention achieved one of its aims to encourage socialisation and was consistent with the literature on the importance of socialisation activities to designing effective inductions (Cook et al. 2005; Thomas 2012; Thomas et al. 2017)

Conclusion

This study indicates that a designed induction intervention focused on the on-entry phase of the study lifecycle can have a positive impact on new higher education students. These findings add to the growing evidence of the impact of strategically designed induction interventions on new student transitions to higher education. This impact is shown to extend to both the social and academic aspects of readiness, specifically the impact of being exposed to information that encourages realistic expectation setting, and being informed about one's readiness for study in a number of key areas: time-management; support networks; independent learning at higher education level, and the opportunity to socialise with peers, senior students and academic staff.

Word Count 5468

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