

**University is not as easy as A, B, C...:
How an extended induction can
improve the transition to university for
new undergraduates**

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What am I talking about?

Extended induction to Geography at Newcastle University (EI)

1. Central thesis
2. How we do this?
3. Why we do this?
4. The student voice
5. The practicalities
6. The benefits

Based on 2 papers

- Richardson, Michael, and Tate, Simon, (2012) University is not as easy as A, B, C...: How an extended induction can improve the transition to university for new undergraduates. *EMERGE* (4): 11-25
- Richardson, Michael and Tate, Simon, (in press) Improving the transition to university: introducing student voices into the formal induction process for new geography undergraduates. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*

Both of these articles available via the Student Transitions website:

<http://research.ncl.ac.uk/studenttransitions/researchoutputs/>

1. Central thesis

'It will argue that creating opportunities for existing students to share insights into their degree programme (and the wider university community) with freshers is an invaluable addition to any induction programme'
(Richardson & Tate 2012, 11).

- **One which is complementary to the information provided by staff, rather than a repeat of it**
- **One which can aid student retention**

2. How we do this?

Extended induction to Geography at Newcastle University (EI)

First piloted in the school of GPS in September 2011

- Timetabled curriculum events from induction week (week 1) through to a 1st year fieldtrip to the Lake District (week 5)
- **Student mentors (leading the last 15 minutes of Geographical Study Skills lessons)**
- **A-Z Survival Guide to Geography at Newcastle (made by the students for the students)**

3. Why do we do this?

Two strands of literature

Aimed at the disparities between school and university (subject matter)

Aimed at the disparities between school and university (input)

But we want to address a 3rd, more practical aspect – namely the contribution which the induction period can make itself in easing the school – university transition

'university and pre-university geography [in the UK] are like distant relations: there is a family connection but it is fairly weak' (Castree, Fuller & Lambert, 2007, p.130).

'academic geographers have a great deal to contribute in any debate over the content of school geography' (Stannard 2003, p. 320).

3. Why do we do this?

The role of induction

'The integration of intensive, supported activities combining individual, social and academic perspectives of the early weeks of University life, has elicited an encouragingly successful programme'.

(Cock et al. 2008, p. 40)

- The work of Cock et al. (2008) researched a five week induction programme at a HE institution in North West England.
- **But how can you define what this research calls 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' programmes?**

3. Why do we do this?

Summary of collated feedback from previous years of induction

“Information overload...”

“Retention of too much information...”

“Boredom...”

3. Why do we do this?

The social role of induction

Yorke (2000) of 979 students from six institutions goes further, arguing that student withdrawal from university can be put down to seven main factors:

1. wrong choice of course
2. unhappiness with the environment of the institution
3. dissatisfaction with aspects of institutional provision
4. inability to cope with the demands of the course
5. poor quality of the student experience
6. financial and interpersonal problems
7. lack of peer support.

Many of these factors can be grouped together to reinforce the importance of social integration to student retention.

4. The student voice

Sober (2011) outlines 4 key benefits:

- a) To harness the knowledge of experienced learners and provide opportunities to disseminate this to new students [**directly benefits new 1st years**]
- b) To make learner self reflection more applied & purposeful & enhance their understanding of the process [**directly benefits 2nd and 3rd year mentors**]
- c) To facilitate a form of group mentoring between different course levels and student cohorts [**directly benefits all undergraduates**]
- d) To use the student voice & creative skills of students to produce learner guides that are accessible [**directly benefits 1st year mentors**]

5. The practicalities

Student Mentors

- Each year 15-20 existing geography undergraduates are recruited
- They existed prior to EI but now have a boosted role
- Reasons for volunteering both altruistic and career focussed
- Mentor hoodies provided
- Training took place over two 2 hour sessions

5. The practicalities

A-Z Survival Guide

- Produced by the existing student mentors themselves
- Coordinated by Geography Ambassador (aka Lead Mentor) which is a paid part time position for one final year student
- Future versions will also be available electronically on Blackboard (Newcastle University's VLE)

5. The practicalities

Cautionary note

- There has been no resistance from the academic staff to the introduction of student mentors – helped by the fact that they did not impede on staff time (with the exception of Simon Tate!)
- **Importantly the mentor training set clear boundaries and emphasised that the mentors were not expected to act as unpaid staff members, taking on the responsibility from lecturers to teach students**

6. The benefits

Responds to 4 thematic priorities of HEA (GEES, 2011)

- a) *Active learning* – students experience taster sessions of entire degree course through a series of formal and informal lectures, seminars, workshops, tutorials and mentor meetings and fieldtrip
- b) *Employability, scholarship and professional development* – paid opportunity for lead mentor, CV development of all mentors
- c) *Learning, teaching and assessment* – participatory approaches, improving staff-student power relations, reflective teaching practice for staff involved
- d) *Recruitment, transition and retention* – increased retention rates in first year students, increase in GeogSoc membership

Concluding thoughts?

Extended induction to Geography at Newcastle University (EI)

1. Complimentary to staff provision, student mentors and A-Z guides can aid student retention
2. Promoting a 'drip feed' approach instead of an 'information binge' is important
3. Our research is contributing to an emerging field in transitions work, focussing on the roles of induction (in particular the social role)
4. The student voice can bridge the staff/student gap with 'insider knowledge' (without the 'down with the kids' patronising)
5. Participatory approach with the student led focus is key to both efficient time management (staff workloads) and effectiveness of input (student experience)
6. Early stages, but signs are that this is working!



And please remember that university is not as easy as the Jackson 5 like to make out