

**I994** group >

**Established** to promote excellence in research and teaching. To enhance student and staff experience within our universities and to set the agenda for higher education.

**Policy Report**  
November 2010

# **Managing Students' Expectations of University**

I994 group >

## The 1994 Group

- > The 1994 Group is established to promote excellence in university research and teaching. It represents 19 of the UK's leading research-intensive, student focused universities. Around half of the top 20 universities in UK national league tables are members of the group.
- > Each member institution delivers an extremely high standard of education, demonstrating excellence in research, teaching and academic support, and provides learning in a research-rich community.
- > The 1994 Group counts amongst its members 12 of the top 20 universities in the Guardian University Guide 2011 league tables published on the 8th June 2010. 7 of the top 10 universities for student experience are 1994 Group Universities (2009 National Student Survey). In 17 major subject areas 1994 Group universities are the UK leaders achieving 1st place in their field (THE RAE subject rankings 2008). 57% of the 1994 Group's research is rated 4\* 'world-leading' or 3\* 'internationally excellent' (RAE 2008, HEFCE).
- > The 1994 Group represents: University of Bath, Birkbeck University of London, Durham University, University of East Anglia, University of Essex, University of Exeter, Goldsmiths University of London, Institute of Education University of London, Royal Holloway University of London, Lancaster University, University of Leicester, Loughborough University, Queen Mary University of London, University of Reading, University of St Andrews, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of Surrey, University of Sussex, University of York.

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# Managing Students' Expectations of University

This report has been produced by Dr Harriet Dunbar-Morris  
on behalf of the 1994 Group Student Experience Policy Group:  
[www.1994group.ac.uk/studentexperience](http://www.1994group.ac.uk/studentexperience).

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## Executive Summary

As part of the JISC-funded Student Expectations of University project, aimed at enhancing applicants' understanding of university experiences, the 1994 Group have produced this report to illustrate innovative and excellent practice in the areas of:

- > communicating with prospective students;
- > providing information, advice and guidance (IAG) to applicants;
- > managing student expectations of university.

All of the examples of best practice given in this report are about universities helping students learn and research as much as possible about their institutions and courses before enrolling, making them therefore less likely to consider dropping out.

The case studies presented highlight the success of engaging students themselves in the provision of IAG. This kind of partnership is particularly valuable when it comes to explaining the difference between learning at school and learning at university which is key to student retention.

The report highlights the need to consider providing IAG in four different areas: capacity building; academic experience; social experience; and professional services; and using a variety of means to achieve this, from websites and web resources to social media.

In an increasingly competitive HE sector the need for the type of IAG highlighted in this report will become more, not less, important, and increasingly so if student contributions to their higher education rise. As the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance indicated, information is essential to deliver choice to a diverse student population, whilst our research indicates that information must be coupled with advice and guidance if it is to drive well-informed decision-making.

The 1994 Group is developing a new online IAG resource, to supplement and complement the variety and comprehensiveness of information already available via a variety of information websites, in the following ways:

- > ensuring all groups of prospective students are catered for, as shown in Loughborough University's **International Students' Website** and **Supporting Care Experienced Students** work, the University of Exeter's **Interactive Online Resource for Prospective International Research Students**, Birkbeck's **Transition to HE** project for part-time students, the Institute of Education's **Change to Teach** programme for the unemployed, Royal Holloway's **Mature Students' Engagement** initiatives, and the University of East Anglia's **Engagement with International Students**;
- > using rich media, such as blogs, forums, Youtube, Facebook, etc. to offer applicants a variety of ways to engage with universities, exemplified by the University of Lancaster's **accommodation Facebook group** and its **Student Charters** work, Birkbeck's **Transition into HE** online IAG, the University of Exeter's **Welcome Week Memory Card and New Students Information Website**, Durham University's **Searchable Online Programme Database for Prospective Students**, Goldsmith's **GoSLuRP** project's use of winkball, and the University of Leicester's **Blackboard Taster**;
- > providing ways in which prospective students can interact with the views of current students, such as blogs, forums, and talking heads, like the University of Reading's **Student Stories** resource.

# Introduction

As part of the JISC-funded *Student Expectations of University* project, aimed at enhancing applicants' understanding of university experiences, the 1994 Group have produced this report to illustrate innovative and excellent practice in the areas of:

- > communicating with prospective students;
- > providing information, advice and guidance (IAG) to applicants;
- > managing student expectations of university.

The Group believe that providing transparent and accurate information about universities and the nature of what they offer should be a priority in delivering excellent student experience and managing student expectations of university. Research shows that students need clear and accessible information to enable them to understand the choices available. Prospective students deserve more than glossy advertising prospectuses to inform crucial decisions about which university to attend and which course to study.

# Background

The 1994 Group has been campaigning for three years to improve the transparency and accuracy of information available. In its 2007 *'Enhancing the Student Experience'* Policy Report<sup>1</sup>, the 1994 Group identified as one of its key challenges the requirement to provide transparent and accurate information about the experience that students can expect at university. The Group also pledged to work to ensure that information which can enhance applicants' understanding of the university experience is made available in an effective way.

A student's experience of university does not begin when they step onto campus on the first day of their first university year, but much earlier than that during the application and admissions processes. The early relationship between student and university is very important in preparing students for university life. From an Higher Education Academy survey examining the experience of first year students in higher education (HE), it appears that 41% of students who knew little or nothing about their course before enrolment had thought of withdrawing, compared with 25% of those who knew a moderate amount or a lot, strongly suggesting that the more students know about their institutions and courses before enrolling, the less likely they are to consider dropping out.<sup>2</sup>

The need for effective and timely IAG with regards to HE has indeed long been recognised by researchers and by universities. For example, Hutchings reported in 2003<sup>3</sup> that lack of information is among the major explanations for low participation in HE by working class groups, citing the work of Connor and Dewson, 2001; Howieson and

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<sup>1</sup> *'Enhancing the Student Experience'* Policy Report, 1994 Group 2007: [www.1994group.ac.uk/documents/public/SEPolicyReport.pdf](http://www.1994group.ac.uk/documents/public/SEPolicyReport.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> *'The First Year Experience Survey'*, HEA 2006. See: [www.heacademy.ac.uk/news/detail/2007/First\\_year\\_experience\\_survey](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/news/detail/2007/First_year_experience_survey) ; [www.heacademy.ac.uk/news/detail/2007/first\\_year\\_experience\\_study\\_mantz\\_yorke](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/news/detail/2007/first_year_experience_study_mantz_yorke) ; [www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/publications/exchange/FYEFinalReport.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/publications/exchange/FYEFinalReport.pdf). See also First Year Experience literature review: [www.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/detail/litreview/lr\\_2006\\_harvey](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/detail/litreview/lr_2006_harvey)

<sup>3</sup> Hutchings, M. *Information, advice and cultural discourses of higher education*, in Archer et al., *Higher education and social class*, Routledge, 2003.

Seiple, 1996; Keen and Higgins, 1990; and Thomas, 2001. Whilst the National Audit Office (NAO) reported in 2007<sup>4</sup> that all of the institutions they visited were *'conscious of the need to provide potential students with accurate information about the courses offered'*.

The NAO also identified a number of reasons why students might not be prepared for HE, which could be resolved by the provision of appropriate IAG:

- > *the course content may not be what the student was expecting;*
- > *students may not have the study skills in place for success, or realise the extent to which progress will rely on self-direction;*
- > *students may not realise the level of commitment required to succeed;*
- > *the level of the course may be too difficult;*
- > *late applications for Disabled Students' Allowances may mean the student does not have the support and equipment in place at the start of term;*
- > *wrong choice of course;*
- > *students may not have researched their choice deeply, especially if entering late;*
- > *students may be channelled into inappropriate subjects (especially working class men);*
- > *lack of information about higher education can lead to stereotypical choices of course and institution (especially students from disadvantaged areas);*
- > *working class students may lack the confidence to change course or institution.*

The right IAG is useful to promote the benefits of learning, help individuals to address and overcome the barriers to learning, and support them in making realistic and well-informed choices.

Current research projects under the HEFCE/Paul Hamlyn Foundation programme also flag up the increased likelihood of students dropping out of university as they have not made well-informed decisions about HE-level study: *'lack of appropriate information, advice and guidance can contribute to poor choice of institution, subject and course, all of which are reported to contribute to early withdrawal. Limited information may also result in less awareness, understanding and knowledge about higher education and thus less realistic expectations about what studying in HE entails. Unrealistic expectations may relate to amount and type of academic study, different learning formats and personal and academic autonomy'*.

Musselbrook and Dean (2003) concluded that information about what students' can expect in lectures and tutorials and how much time they should devote to independent study needs to be better communicated before the start of the academic year. In addition greater access to relevant and informed members of staff would have helped prepare students and reduce the anxiety levels borne of not knowing what to expect.

A number of recent reports<sup>5</sup> have placed emphasis on prospective students having access to good quality IAG which includes access to comparable information on what and how they will learn, what they can expect to do when they qualify, how their study can be funded and how much it will cost.

The previous government's blueprint for higher education, *Higher Ambitions*, said that potential students should have the best possible information on the content of courses, and on the value in academic and employment terms of specific qualifications. Under the current coalition government and in the light of Lord Browne's recent recommendations<sup>6</sup> regarding variable fees and any proposed raising of the fees cap, it is felt that it is ever more necessary that students be enabled to make genuinely informed choices about what they might study, and the long-term employment prospects that may open up to them.

As one of the few public national indicators directly focused on assessing the student experience, the National Student Survey is fundamental to managing student expectations of university. However research has shown that

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<sup>4</sup> National Audit Office, *Staying the course: the retention of students in higher education*, NAO 2007.

<sup>5</sup> The National Student Forum Annual Report 2008; The House of Commons, Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee Report on Students and Universities: 11th Report of Session 2008-09 July 2009; *Stronger Together: business and universities in turbulent times*. CBI Higher Education Task Force. September 2009; *Awareness, take-up and impact of international bursaries and scholarships in England*. Office for Fair Access. December 2009; *One Step Beyond: Making the most of postgraduate education*. Smith et al. March 2010.

<sup>6</sup> *Securing a sustainable future for higher education in England. An independent review of higher education & student finance in England*, October 2010: <http://hereview.independent.gov.uk/hereview/report>

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there is a need for a wider range of clear information about the nature of the specific student experience being offered by each university, and some guidance about how to make use of it.

Emerging alongside Lord Browne's review is a call for a standard set of information to be produced for all prospective students, which arose from HEFCE-funded research into the information needs of users of public information about HE<sup>7</sup>. The survey of prospective and current students, carried out for that research, concluded that students who knew what information they were looking for could generally find it, but many appeared not to be looking. The information which was considered useful was that about student satisfaction, employment, support and cost.

Although one might argue that there is already a wealth of information both at institution and subject level: Unistats<sup>8</sup> provides data such as National Student Survey results, student qualifications on entry, drop-out rates, class of degree and employment outcomes; bestCourse4me<sup>9</sup> allows individual students to give their views of teaching standards and the quality of feedback on their work, and provides more detailed information than universities currently publish on graduate employment rates and salary levels. As the National Student Forum pointed out in 2008<sup>10</sup> there is a need some kind of coherent framework which would help prospective students navigate the HE journey and make sense of the plethora of IAG websites in the public domain. In addition, because students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely than others to know about or use the sources of information available, the information that is made available to prospective students and the ways in which it is made available must take into account the backgrounds and contexts of those students.

It is in this context that the 1994 Group universities have been working to communicate early and effectively with prospective students, so as to provide the right IAG and to manage their expectations of university, as the following case studies will show.

The case studies are presented in four categories: capacity building; academic experience; social experience; and professional services, which describe the kinds of IAG being offered.

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<sup>7</sup> Understanding the information needs of users of public information about higher education, Report to HEFCE by Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University, July 2010: [www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdrreports/2010/rd12\\_10/rd12\\_10b.pdf](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdrreports/2010/rd12_10/rd12_10b.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <http://unistats.direct.gov.uk>

<sup>9</sup> [www.bestcourse4me.com](http://www.bestcourse4me.com)

<sup>10</sup> [http://nationalstudentforum.com/NSF\\_annual\\_report\\_2008.pdf](http://nationalstudentforum.com/NSF_annual_report_2008.pdf)

## Capacity building

Capacity building initiatives are about the development of prospective students' skills (e.g. study skills), knowledge (e.g. information) and resilience; which will enable them to engage effectively in their university course and life. The focus is on creating opportunities for students to become familiar with the HE environment. Four examples are presented here: the Institute of Education develops prospective students' skills and knowledge with regards to the teaching profession; at Birkbeck the Transition into HE project provides information about the HE environment; the University of Exeter supports the engagement of new students with university life during its Welcome Week; and Royal Holloway engages with mature students' expectations of university through a variety of means.

### > Change to Teach, Institute of Education, University of London

The IOE's *Change to Teach* scheme, co-funded by HEFCE and run in the academic year 2009-10, was designed to address the effect of the economic downturn through supporting individuals in the Greater London Region whose recent or current employment had been or was likely to be affected by the recession. The course was designed to enable participants to make an informed decision about entering the teaching profession.

Although the IOE had initially anticipated receipt of applications from those at risk of redundancy or recently unemployed, on-going analysis of the work-related circumstances of applicants prompted an expansion of these categories and as a result their final cohort included students who additionally fitted at least one of the following categories: extreme under-employment linked to existing knowledge, skill and experience; serial employment on a temporary, short-term and/or part-time basis; severely affected self-employment and/or difficulty finding suitable employment following illness and/or migration.

As well as exploiting their own internal marketing opportunities via the IOE prospectus, information line, website and partner schools, recruitment of the target group included promotion and notification of the course via on-line advertising opportunities including: Google and Yahoo; LinkedIn; Facebook; Guardian Jobs Online; the CBI directory; and the University of London Careers group. Press advertising included the Evening Standard and London Business Matters.

They found that although incredibly successful in boosting hits to the IOE website's *Change to Teach* landing page, these hits were not following through to completed applications on UKPass. However, personalised one-to-one work with applicants contacting them directly proved highly successful in retaining interest and securing successful applications. Interestingly, this personal touch enabled them to tease out the circumstances of potential applicants, frequently reluctant to disclose the true nature of their employment situation and therefore clarify their eligibility.

The scheme commenced with participants being encouraged through on-going, face-to-face and structured, self-directed individual and group activity, to analyse and match their pre-existing knowledge, skills and experience to the competencies required of a teacher.

Action planning in order to successfully adapt and transpose existing skill sets, as well as to identify and address competency gaps, was a key feature of the scheme and students were well supported in this iterative exercise. Building upon this readily identifiable foundation, further knowledge was introduced through introductory teacher training, career and progression counselling, and coaching from a team of experienced teaching and learning professionals, and London-based classroom teachers. Modes of delivery included face-to-face seminars and workshops, extensive use of the virtual learning environment, regular group emails and invitations to Institute events and activities, together with the development of a personal portfolio linked to compulsory placement tasks supported by the school-based mentor. Again they found that the addition of a highly personalised and individualised communication by email, phone and face-to-face, although labour intensive, made the greatest difference to student retention course, completion and scheme satisfaction.

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Importantly the course delivery enabled participants to access learning opportunities from varied starting points, and travel at their own pace. This was essential given the varied levels of confidence, self-awareness and length of time out of a traditional learning environment, and/or employment, that was a feature of the cohort.

The journey's end for participants has equally reflected the diversity of its students and although for many this has meant successful applications to teacher training, for others it has resulted in action planning towards future teacher training or a significant boost in confidence enabling a return to study or paid employment.

### **Thumbnail sketch of selected participant:**

*Severely under-employed*

Ian applied to the *Change to Teach* scheme as he felt that he was 'stuck' in a routine job and could offer more to the teaching profession. His qualifications included a first class honours degree in English and a Masters degree with distinction in English Literature. However his financial situation on graduation meant that he had to 'get the first job that was available'. He worked as an Assistant Chef and Support Worker before becoming a Royal Mail Postman. Ian has used his experiences on the *Change to Teach* scheme to apply successfully for a PGCE place from September 2011.

### **> Transition into HE, Birkbeck, University of London**

At Birkbeck, University of London the *Transition into HE* project is focusing on the improvement of undergraduate retention by aiding applicants' and enrolled students' transition into HE. It comprises four phases: pre-application online information, advice and guidance; online material for applicants; post-application online induction and orientation activities and post-enrolment support during the crucial first term.

This is an on-going project.

### **> The Welcome Week Memory Card and New Students Information Website, University of Exeter**

This student-centred project was devised following student feedback on the University of Exeter's Welcome Week information delivery, and also the capital building projects on campus which were necessitating a change in information delivery during Welcome Week itself.

Previously, web information had been available during September, but did not include substantial information on events during Welcome Week, what to expect in terms of the teaching and learning environment, or how to engage with and make the most of the local area.

This information was provided to students' through hard copy leaflets and flyers in a Welcome Bag which they collected when they arrived at the University. Student feedback indicated that they and their parents would prefer to receive more information at an earlier stage. This was recognised by the University of Exeter to fall within the critical arrival transition stage of the student lifecycle and to be a key information, advice and guidance (IAG) requirement for new students. In line with the University of Exeter focus on working with students as full and active partners in learning and IAG, the *Welcome Week Memory Card* project has been delivered by an Exeter Graduate. Charlotte Jones demonstrated a passion for the University, an understanding of the University structure and brought to the project a wealth of experience as a student and with respect to student life within the local area.

The project has required collaboration from every student-facing service and activity at the University as well as a considerable investment of time from the University Web Development Team. Project delivery targets:

- > to produce a Welcome Week website that included all information a new student of any level, or any campus, might require to support them through the arrival transition stage of the student lifecycle – the weeks before arrival, during Welcome Week and the first weeks of term;
- > to inform student expectations of the University, of the University's expectations of them as a student and lay the foundations of the idea of 'partnership' learning;
- > to provide a plain English and easily navigable information resource – without needing to know the University 'terminology';

- > to deliver the website at the beginning of August 2010 to enable students to access information at an early stage (7 weeks before Welcome Week);
- > to deliver two independent websites for the two campus locations – Exeter and Cornwall;
- > to deliver two location-specific USB memory cards to be sent to students with their UniCard during September as part of pre-arrival IAG provision. Students who would not be sent their UniCard in advance would receive theirs during Welcome Week;
- > to provide significant storage space on the memory card for a student to use for their own document storage. In doing so ensure the card has a long term use and benefit for students so that it is retained and can continue to be a primary IAG resource throughout the student's lifecycle. Ensure the design and medium used is attractive enough to encourage long term student use.

Students of every level on each of Exeter's three campuses, and their families as well as staff and external advisers are the target audience of this resource.

The resource itself was developed in Terminal 4 web design programme. The end product included video, text, images, pdf booklets and checklists. The website was launched on 2 August 2010: [www.exeter.ac.uk/newstudents](http://www.exeter.ac.uk/newstudents).

Initial feedback was sought from selected staff and it has been encouraging. The University has also included a feedback button on the website and memory cards. The website received 45,287 visits and 183,160 page views in the six week period since going live on 13th August 2010. More formal feedback will be sought from the students via the New Students Survey which will launch in October 2010.

### > Mature Students' Engagement, Royal Holloway, University of London

To improve the engagement with mature learners with no previous higher education experience the Admissions and UK Recruitment Office at Royal Holloway, University of London (RHUL) developed, and continues to develop, a series of initiatives and interventions, centred on Access to Higher Education students, covering key aspects of the mature student journey at pre-entry, admissions and retention stages, learner support, relationship building, and partnership working. The focus is on creating progression opportunities for mature students and providing high quality advice and guidance to enable mature students to become familiar with the HE environment, make informed choices, and experience a smooth transition from further to higher education.

Particular events have been established for mature learners, including a Mature Students' Open Day, a presentation providing advice and guidance to mature students at all Open Days, subject specific outreach events delivered by academics, and progression events in local FE colleges. In particular events held on-campus have the focus of providing mature students with some experience of higher education and a greater understanding of what to expect as undergraduates. Mature Student Ambassadors play an important role in providing an authentic voice at events and are engaged in much of this work. Feedback from participants is collected and monitored and as one attendee at the Mature Students' Open Day commented:

*I really enjoyed the Open Day, I felt welcomed by the student ambassadors and found the Criminology and Sociology seminars both interesting and informative....many thanks for an inspiring day.*

#### Access student from a local FE College

An online newsletter is produced called 'Re-connect' including student profiles, information on the UCAS application process, writing personal statements, financial and other support available, and the opportunities for co-curricula activities. At the start of each academic year an orientation session is held to acquaint mature students with the facilities and support services available to them.

Much of the work with mature students is student-facing, but in addition a Royal Holloway Access Forum has been established, including representatives from local FE Colleges, providing an opportunity to expand RHUL's links with Access to Higher Education providers in the region, and to facilitate structured interaction with mature students and applicants.

## Academic experience

Initiatives related to the academic experience are about explaining learning and teaching practices; assessment and feedback; the content of the curriculum and the development and organisation of the curriculum. Four examples are presented here: at Durham the initiative is about providing information on the curriculum efficiently; the focus is on explaining learning and teaching practices at Lancaster through Student Charters; Leicester's Blackboard taster is about experiencing learning and teaching practices; whilst at Exeter the Doing a UK PhD resource is aimed at explaining the learning and teaching practices involved in postgraduate study to international students.

### > Searchable Online Programme Database for Prospective Students, Durham University

Durham University are currently in the process of creating a searchable online programme database for prospective students, to launch in Autumn 2010.

The database will be located on the University's top-level web pages, 2-3 clicks away from the University's homepage. The aim of the database is to provide headline facts on each programme: programme content, admissions information, fees and funding, career opportunities, etc. The database will allow students to compare programmes easily, and will provide them with access to fact-based, quantitative information very quickly. This will help ensure students are better informed, allowing them to short-list institutions and programmes with much greater confidence.

The intended audience for the database will be undergraduates and taught postgraduates (home, international, mature), as well as parents, teachers and careers advisors. Durham University are committed to ensuring their website is fully accessible, thus ensuring information is available to people with disabilities.

The database will be launched on the University's own website, as research consistently demonstrates that this is one of the first places students go to access information on Durham University. Printed material will direct people to the online database for information.

The success of the database will be measured by web statistics, application numbers and qualitative feedback from students once they have used the database.

### > Student Charters, Lancaster University

Lancaster University, since 2008, has made a commitment to students about matters like the minimum contact hours that they may expect, and the maximum number of other students they can expect in seminars. The academic contact commitments are highlighted in the prospectus and details such as contact hours, average weekly workload and assessment are noted for all degree schemes.

Lancaster University is committed to providing a safe and productive environment to help students achieve their full potential. The student charter sets out the approach which the University takes to support students' learning.

The charter defines the standards of facilities, services and teaching that a student at Lancaster University can expect to receive, and the responsibilities of students to the University. It provides a set of benchmarks which the University will strive to operate, although it is not intended as a legally binding document.

The document is intended to act as a signpost to many sources of useful information which already exist. It covers all students currently registered at the University, on either taught or research programmes.

## > The Blackboard Taster, University of Leicester

The distance learning recruitment team provide specialist and highly personalised advice to prospective distance learning students at the University of Leicester. An enquirer of a programme is automatically assigned an advisor who becomes that prospective student's key point of contact during the decision-making and application process. Communications are undertaken through email and telephone, with all interactions being recorded against the prospective student's record.

One element of the advice service is access to the '*Blackboard Taster*'. Recruitment of distance learning students is challenging on a number of levels, particularly as potential students are unlikely to visit the campus, or experience face-to-face communication with the University at an open day for example.

*Blackboard Taster* courses are the first stage of a three step process that has been developed to improve the University's distance learner student experience. The *Blackboard Taster* is introduced at the point of making a decision about where to study (the following two steps are the Blackboard Orientation module for those who have just started or are waiting to begin their studies, and module one).

The *Blackboard Taster* offers the prospective student an opportunity to sample the course before applying, and provides an insight into course presentation, structure, content, learning methods, course delivery and on-line environment. It is an open Blackboard course and does not therefore require University of Leicester computer account details.

The Taster helps support recruitment of distance learning students by:

- > acting as a hook to encourage further communication and interaction with the University;
- > reassuring students that learning materials are thorough and of high quality;
- > offering a glimpse of vital support networks;
- > giving an insight into the level or difficulty of the course (may help to set expectations of any pre-requisite experience/knowledge required);
- > giving an insight into the amount of work involved in studying by distance learning;
- > ensuring that students are fully prepared before making their application and therefore reducing last minute nerves/hesitation/non-registration;
- > introducing them to Blackboard, a very useful and in some cases compulsory learning resource.

Students who choose to study by distance learning are generally professionals who have been educated to degree level, but may have been out of formal education for some time. They seek to study by distance learning as a means to enhance their career prospects. Most programmes offered by distance learning are at postgraduate level. This group of students faces two challenges: grappling with a return to education whilst juggling personal lives and careers; and having the confidence to study a higher level qualification at a distance, which can be perceived as a less-supported way to study. The *Blackboard Taster* is designed to alleviate some of these concerns and manage expectations.

Email and telephone communications are used to introduce prospective students to the *Blackboard Taster*. The Taster itself is part of the University's virtual learning environment. It contains Welcome; Learning at Leicester; Course Materials - Example Learning Unit/Module and Student Discussion sections.

All students who make an application are sent a questionnaire that asks for feedback about the advisory service. A section of this focuses on the *Blackboard Taster* and its usefulness as part of the decision making process. 75% of those that used the Taster agreed that it was 'good' or 'very good'.

Progression onto a course once an offer has been made is another indicator of the effectiveness of the tool in managing student expectations. This is something that the University of Leicester are starting to analyse, along with development of a feedback element to the Taster itself.

## > **Doing a UK PhD – an Interactive Online Resource for Prospective International Research Students, University of Exeter**

This highly collaborative and student-centred project brought together professionals from across Education Enhancement, International Office, Communications and Marketing and Research and Knowledge Transfer at the University of Exeter, to produce a creative package of information, guidance and support for prospective PhD students.

The aim was to produce a high-quality, interactive, online resource (including video, audio and on-screen interaction) for prospective students which would educate them about PhD level study generally and at Exeter. The team wanted to provide clearer guidance and to 'demystify' the PhD and the application process, so as to attract a higher volume and quality of applicants. The value of this resource is that it can be studied in students' own time and at their own pace. It is 24/7 and engaging. It is also accessible for visually or audio impaired applicants (with appropriate assistive software).

From their own research and experience, the following taxonomy guided Exeter in structuring the module around the sorts of issues potentially raised by prospective students thinking about PhD level study:

- > What is really involved in a PhD? Am I suited to this type of study?
- > What skills and personal attributes will I need and acquire to be successful?
- > What does a supervisor do?
- > What are the English language requirements?
- > How can I hear about current student experiences?
- > Where should I study, and why might Exeter be attractive?
- > What sources of support, training and guidance are there to help me complete?
- > What is the application process like, and what should be included in my research proposal?

All of the questions above have been addressed innovatively and in an interactive manner in this project, including through a variety of current research staff and student interviews across different subjects. Of particular note is a structured process for moving the prospective candidate forward, taking them from the initial research idea to the application stage. Visit: [www.exeter.ac.uk/postgraduate](http://www.exeter.ac.uk/postgraduate) for more details.

International Research Students are the target audience but the resource is of potential value to all prospective research students.

The resource was developed with Articulate ® – an e-learning development tool and fully utilised video, audio, links to web resources and also included paper-based downloads for future reference.

Whilst the project was in the development phase, the team sought initial feedback on content and usability from students and local representatives overseas, to ensure the language and structure used was accessible across a range of cultures. The module had a soft launch in May 2010 in order to gather feedback from a wider internal audience of academics and support staff such as in-session English teachers, along with the existing 2010 PhD applicant base.

The module has now been integrated with the University of Exeter's online postgraduate prospectus, and the intention is to use the resource intensively in the 2010/11 cycle as both a training tool for local representatives and relevant sponsoring bodies. Prospective applicants will be introduced to the tool via these stakeholders and directly at international recruitment events and through CRM communications. Provision has been made to formally review the module once a year and make any necessary changes.

Early indications suggest that the resource is getting approximately 30 hits a day on the resource hosted website.

## Social experience

Providing IAG to prospective students with regards to the social experience of university life can also be carried out using newer forms of social media. For example, the University of Lancaster uses Facebook to communicate with prospective applicants with regard to accommodation, whilst there is an initiative at the University of Reading which attempts to explain university life and the social experience to potential applicants via audio and video clips, blogs and articles.

### > Social Networking to Help Students Understand the Range of Accommodation Available, Lancaster University

After choosing a course and an institution, accommodation will be high on the list of priorities for students to deal with, often generating a high volume of enquiries, as well as causing dilemmas of choice, confusion and anxieties.

The Accommodation Office at Lancaster University has developed a wide variety of web-based information and publicity material over recent years, but recognised that we now live in a world dominated by social networking sites. Rather than actively looking for information on the internet, students expect to be able to find it on Facebook, and to have timely updates dropped into their news feeds at the appropriate times.

As well as the traditional sources of information (which remain vital in terms of variety and inclusivity), a Lancaster University Accommodation profile was set up on Facebook ([facebook.com/LUAccommodation](https://facebook.com/LUAccommodation)) to further satisfy the demands of the modern student. Although toying with this idea, many university accommodation offices seem reluctant to proceed fully, instead leaving the arena to the Students' Unions and sticking to their traditional communication channels.

In going ahead with this Lancaster University has given their students the opportunity to have information presented to them in an alternative way. While it is important to continue to present relevant information, there is little point duplicating material already available. Facebook gave the University the opportunity to post over 100 photographs that for reasons of design, style and cost, they were never able to publish in the more traditional media of web and publications. There is now a photograph album for each of the University's nine colleges, comprehensively detailing all accommodation types on offer in each one, from building exteriors, to bedrooms, kitchens and even bathrooms where possible. In doing this the University has addressed the age-old complaint that there are never enough pictures of the accommodation available.

In terms of managing expectations, this has been a great asset to the University. While much of our residential estate has recently been refurbished or rebuilt, some of it is older. Facebook has given the University the opportunity to present the range of accommodation in a positive but realistic way, helping students make an informed choice of accommodation.

Lancaster University is also happy to engage in a dialogue with the students on Facebook, with many taking the opportunity to post questions and comments rather than use the traditional methods of phone and email. The transition between the old and new methods has certainly been noticeable, though a university must have the staff in place to deal with questions in this new way. It is also important to engage with students in a different, more informal style suitable to the platform than in traditional correspondence.

As of 30 September 2010 the accommodation profile has attracted 1225 friends (about half of the University's intake) and an initial assessment reassures the team that overseas students are just as happy to engage as UK students. While targeted at students on the whole it is not restricted, so anyone with an interest can add us as a friend. It has certainly contributed to a noticeable drop in enquiries, and Lancaster hopes it will also result in an increase in the number of students pleased with their accommodation choices.

Lancaster University is hoping to further harness the potential of Facebook in the future.

## 12 1994 Group

Other information sources to help students make their accommodation decisions include podcasts and an online booklet:

- > podcasts of students talking about College life with shots of College and accommodation for example: [www.lancs.ac.uk/campustour/09-alex.htm](http://www.lancs.ac.uk/campustour/09-alex.htm);
- > booklet with more information on choosing the College and the accommodation type: [www.lancs.ac.uk/sbs/accommodation/guidetothecolleges.pdf](http://www.lancs.ac.uk/sbs/accommodation/guidetothecolleges.pdf).

### > **Student Stories, University of Reading**

Student Stories is an innovative and exciting web resource offering students and other young people access to honest accounts of student and university life from those who have experienced it first-hand.

The website consists of hundreds of audio clips, generated from informal interviews with current students and recent graduates from a range of UK universities about their undergraduate experience. They explore students' learning, thoughts, conflicts and changing feelings in full and candid detail.

Each clip focuses on a core aspect of student life covering themes such as:

- > the transition from school to university;
- > developing a sense of identity;
- > adapting to a new academic culture;
- > juggling part-time work and study;
- > thinking about the future.

The site also features video clips, blogs and articles produced by students on topical issues of relevance to current and potential undergraduates.

## Professional services

Prospective students may engage with a wide range of professional services such as student services, disability services, careers services, marketing and recruitment, admissions, outreach and widening participation units in making their decisions about university. In the examples given here the universities of Loughborough, East Anglia, Lancaster and Goldsmiths, University of London describe the services they provide to particular groups of students such as those who have been in care and international students.

### > Supporting Care Experienced Students, Loughborough University

Loughborough University is committed to supporting young people in care, and care leavers who have the potential to study at higher education (HE) level. This includes unaccompanied asylum seekers.

#### Outreach

There are very small numbers of care leavers progressing into HE nationally (estimated figure is 7%). They are often un-represented in the Aimhigher cohort chosen by schools, thus a Leicestershire based project (to which Loughborough University is a key contributor) was initiated to target care experienced young people for outreach and aspiration raising activities.

Loughborough's Student Outreach and Recruitment team has been pivotal in delivering a ground-breaking Summer School over the past 5 years, in association with 2 other universities in the county. This summer school targets young people from Year 10 and older, who are in care, in the East Midlands region. This is achieved through excellent partnership with social services and other organisations, and a range of outreach and support activities are growing through these partnerships. Numbers attending the summer school have increased over the years from 9 to 19.

#### Transitional support

Once a care experienced student has a place to study at Loughborough University, they are offered a named contact to assist them with issues such as obtaining 52 week accommodation during their studies. They also receive a bursary worth up to £1,500 per annum.

Contact is made directly with the student, by following up on the UCAS declaration of time spent in care.

#### Other information

Loughborough has held the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark since 2007, illustrating the level of the University's commitment.

In addition, Loughborough alumni have funded a PhD research project (ongoing) into the impact of the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark on care leavers' progress into HE.

### > International Applicant Engagement, University of East Anglia

The International Office at the University of East Anglia holds pre-departure briefings in country for applicants due to study with them in September each year. Unfortunately the team are not able to visit all countries so they have developed online pre-departure briefings by video. They work with a company called mega meetings who facilitate the technology and send applicants the details of when the briefing will be and a password to access the meeting.

International office staff hold the briefings and there is an online chat facility that allows students to ask questions as the meeting progresses. In order to answer these questions quickly, the University's international student

ambassadors are logged on at the same time and can answer the questions. The University also plan to have the ambassadors hold the briefings in their target languages.

Following the briefing the students are given a short survey so that the usefulness of the service can be tracked. There have been some teething problems but these have mostly been due to the internet connection in various countries. On the whole the initiative is being well-received.

### > International Students' Website, Loughborough University

Websites for prospective students always need to combine two very different types of content. The detailed admissions content can sit awkwardly beside high-impact marketing/recruitment material. If one then adds the recent points-based visa process and complex English language requirements, the challenge facing an *International students'* website is even greater.

Loughborough University addressed this challenge by concentrating initially on the planning and content of the website. Feedback from the old website, looking at common enquiries, and excellent ongoing contact with the University's international students saved the time and cost of a formal user experience research phase, without compromising the usability of the website.

Leaving the homepage design until very late in the project ensured it better fitted the underlying content. It helped to focus the attention of people contributing to the project on the content itself instead of the homepage. The end result is a page which not only promotes the multi-media features and dynamic content, such as 'latest news' items, but also acts as an effective hub for the rest of the website. High-profile features the team wanted to promote are present, but in a way that also provides links to useful information. The location, size and design of all homepage elements were carefully chosen.

The prominence of the student profiles was identified as a priority early on in the project. The team had existing text-based profiles, but some more striking video profiles were required for the new website. Student profiles provide prospective students with someone to whom they can relate, reducing the corporate barrier. The use of video further enhances the personal touch. Good ongoing relations with the University's international students were an important part of identifying some willing volunteers who could talk about their experience at the University on camera. In a nice touch, all the videos were filmed and edited by Loughborough students in the students' union media centre.

In addition to many of the student profile videos being available in the student's native language, the website has University information presented within 15 separate foreign language sections. To students, parents and sponsors from a particular region, providing information in their language is an added convenience; to other visitors it is another indication of the priority and support given to international students and the University's internationalisation objectives.

The overall structure of the website subtly guides different users to content relevant to them. Prospective students are provided with links to what is known to be the most sought after information, with the detailed guides for those already holding an offer for a place segregated into their own section. This helps avoid confusion but also keeps the information available for those who want to view it.

Behind the scenes, the website uses Google Analytics to generate further understanding of how users from different countries make use of the website. In the future the team can use this to provide an even better user experience by adapting the site to the way the visitors naturally want to interact with it.

### > International Students' Online Guide, Lancaster University

Lancaster University has a high proportion of international students and whilst providing an excellent academic experience, it become clear that differing expectations, demands and 'culture shock' can lead to an undermining of the overall student experience. Feedback from some international students indicated that it is critical to get as much accurate information in advance about the University as possible, but that existing websites could be difficult to navigate and also quite dull.

The University gave a small grant (£3,500) to the Graduate College to develop an online guide for international students, in particular to help minimise 'culture shock'. Using this money three international students were recruited

to act as editors, website developers and video producers, additionally volunteers were recruited to appear in videos and write content.

In the process of producing the final site it has become evident that what UK staff and students believe is an appropriate informal approach may not be the same as what all international students believe. It was felt that the site must retain 'authority', so whilst videos and a more relaxed structure are appropriate, a core of formal advice should remain.

The main innovation has been that the University fully trusted international students to develop their own website to 'officially' communicate an unofficial view of the University. It became clear early on that students were proud of their institution and left to talk freely they 'sold' the university well. Much of the information is identical to that contained in 'official' pages, but in a format that was driven by students. For example the content includes video interviews with students.

The monitoring by the International Student Advisor has been 'light touch' which has enabled the focus to be on what students think is important, and not what staff or UK students think. Although steering away from visa information and other complicated fields was necessary.

An additional bonus has been to support students in the development of skills which can benefit their employability, from team work to video editing, and project management to copy writing.

The target audience for the guide is international students, in particular those who have chosen Lancaster at the pre-arrival stage. It is felt that in the long-run demonstrating that the institution takes such students 'seriously' may support general recruitment.

The website is driven using a wordpress server, which makes it possible for multiple users to input and comment if required. The website utilises youtube to drive video interviews. It was critical to use low cost solutions that were familiar to students to prevent the technology becoming the focus of the project.

The site launched in the autumn so evaluation is not yet complete. Google Analytics will be used to monitor usage and this will be supported by interview/focus groups to improve the 'feel' of the site. Due to the use of international students in the production of the site a major part of the evaluation will be the recruitment of a new international student team to continue to develop the site and move it forward for the future: this will be critical to sustainability.

### > **GoSLuRP, Goldsmiths, University of London**

GoSLuRP stands for **Goldsmiths Student Lifecycle Relationship Project**, a JISC-funded project that aimed to engage with the Student Lifecycle at Goldsmiths, University of London through transforming the Goldsmith's approach to managing its engagement with students and prospective students. Through this project, the team interacted with two distinct aspects of the student lifecycle to map processes and redesign services, namely:

- > **pre-enrolment:** pre-application, application, and pre-registration;
- > **post-enrolment:** registration, induction, and early retention interventions.

The project investigated some of the more complex engagements and services by focusing on postgraduate, international and widening participation students.

In short; increasing the number of well-prepared students successfully progressing to Goldsmiths from the initial enquiry and through to enrolment and subsequent retention, by identifying opportunities to improve student preparedness and their transition into higher education study.

The project ran from July 2009 to April 2010.

## Conclusion

All of the examples of best practice given in this report are about universities helping students learn and research as much as possible about their institutions and courses before enrolling, making them therefore less likely to consider dropping out.

The report highlights the need to consider providing IAG in four different areas: capacity building; academic experience; social experience; and professional services; and using a variety of means to achieve this, from websites and web resources to social media.

The case studies also highlight the success of engaging students themselves in the provision of IAG, from asking them to describe their own experiences to the next generation to encouraging them to design a website themselves. This kind of partnership is particularly valuable when it comes to explaining the difference between learning at school and learning at university which is key to student retention.

By providing this type of IAG universities and their students are helping to promote the benefits of learning; helping individuals to address and overcome the barriers to learning; and supporting prospective applicants in making realistic and well-informed choices. In an increasingly competitive HE sector the need for the type of IAG highlighted in this report will become more, not less, important, and increasingly so if student contributions to their higher education rise. As Lord Browne indicated information is essential to deliver choice to a diverse student population, whilst our research indicates that information must sit alongside advice and guidance if it is to drive well-informed decision-making.

Enabling prospective students to have access to comparable information on what and how they will learn, what they can expect to do when they qualify, how their study can be funded and how much it will cost, was a logical next step for 1994 Group member institutions, even before Lord Browne's report.

Responses to a survey of HEI staff across the sector carried out by the 1994 Group have highlighted a number of areas where IAG for prospective students could be strengthened in the sector.

Respondents indicated that a proposed new online resource would be useful in providing an additional platform for IAG which could increase the variety, availability and accessibility of IAG content for prospective students, in a structure and format which would avoid information overload by allowing the user to select the information areas of interest to them and when to look at the information.

The new online resource is in development. It will supplement and complement the variety and comprehensiveness of information already available via a variety of information websites, in the following ways:

- > ensuring all groups of prospective students are catered for, as shown in Loughborough University's **International Students' Website** and **Supporting Care Experienced Students** work, the University of Exeter's **Interactive Online Resource for Prospective International Research Students**, Birkbeck's **Transition to HE** project for part-time students, the Institute of Education's **Change to Teach** programme for the unemployed, Royal Holloway's **Mature Students' Engagement** initiatives, and the University of East Anglia's **Engagement with International Students**;
- > using rich media, such as blogs, forums, Youtube, Facebook, etc. to offer applicants a variety of ways to engage with universities, exemplified by the University of Lancaster's **accommodation Facebook group** and its **Student Charters** work, Birkbeck's **Transition into HE** online IAG, the University of Exeter's **Welcome Week Memory Card** and **New Students Information Website**, Durham University's **Searchable Online Programme Database for Prospective Students**, Goldsmith's **GoSLuRP** project's use of winkball, and the University of Leicester's **Blackboard Taster**;
- > providing ways in which prospective students can interact with the views of current students, such as blogs, forums, and talking heads, like the University of Reading's **Student Stories** resource.









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