Bridging the Gap: Enhancing the Student Journey

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Transitions and Tracking Project

‘International students experience multiple contextual transitions – moving to a new country, moving to a new educational system, and moving to programmes for a higher educational degree’ (Jindal-Snape and Rientes, 2016: 2)
Transitions and Tracking Project - What we do:

- Arrange departmental meetings
- Encourage attendance at PG Open Days
- Encourage attendance at local Education Fairs
- Facilitate in learning about departments and courses
- Organise student tracking
Transition and Tracking Project - Why we do it:

‘Commitment from the institutions to create a successful academic and social life for international students will create confidence in those students’ (Ramachandran, 2011: 211)
Transition and Tracking Project - Why we do it:

• To enhance the student journey
• Enable a smoother transition
• Bridge the gap between AEPC and departments
• Follow students through course
Transitions and Tracking Project – How we do it:

• Liaise with departmental administrators
• Encourage student feedback
• Initiate tracking interest via questionnaires
• Organise interviews via questionnaires
• Record interviews
Initial Student Interviews: Who?

• 2 x PhD students
  • Sociology Department
  • Chemistry Department

• 3 x Masters students
  • Management School
  • Medical School
  • Computer Science Department
What did we learn about departmental reading?

- Students doing between 4-6 hours of reading a day
- Mostly journal articles
- No difference in amount of reading between PhD and Masters students
- Computer Science student not doing any reading until T2 – reading client briefs and responding to client meetings and tutor instructions
What did we learn about departmental writing?

PhD students

- working on literature reviews for their thesis
- expected to produce smaller written assignments every time they saw their supervisors.
- Needed to e-mail their supervisors frequently.

Masters students:

- Computer Science
- Given written instructions to respond to a practical project
- Each member of the group had to write 500 words over 2 weeks.
- E-mails to supervisor
- Have to write a dissertation of 15000 words.
What did we learn about departmental writing?

• Medical School - assignment every third week with 6 days to complete. Five assignments of 2-3,000 words in total.
• Literature review 4-5,000 words
• e-mails to supervisor

• Management school - 4 assignments all due in within a few days of each other – 3, 000 words each and also an 800 word assignment to be handed in at the middle of semester 1.
What did we learn about departmental writing?

- No drafts were handed in to tutors for comment – final work was submitted electronically, marked and returned.

- Students felt that tutor comments were mostly useful but that negative comments were made about their English Language and particularly sentence structure.

- Students struggled with handing in more than one written assignment at the same time.
What did we learn about departmental Speaking & listening?

• Speaking was the skill students reported using the most all spoke to supervisors, personal tutors and other students.

• In Computer Science students talked to clients for projects

• The skill they found most difficult

• The skill tutors were most likely to comment on
What did we learn about departmental Speaking & listening?

• All students were surprised at the length of listening events e.g. 2 hour lectures which they found difficult

• All students record lectures or supervisor meetings

• All masters students attend seminar style group meetings with students and tutors

• All had to listen to people with different accents and levels of English
What did we learn about departmental support?

Management School
• Lecturers too busy to give support
• Has personal tutor who helps with questions about the course – very flexible

Computer Science
• Tutors explain about plagiarism

Medical School
• ‘everything is provided that is needed’ but ‘we support each other independently’.
What did we learn about student expectations of their departments?

- Students were not expecting the workload to be so great
- They were surprised that lectures were longer than an hour – sometimes 2 hours
- Hadn’t expected their supervisors and tutors to be so approachable
- Hadn’t expected to work with non-native tutors
- Hadn’t expected to learn about subjects they initially thought were not their own e.g. Law (computer science)
What did we learn about departmental support?

Sociology
• “feel like the month between supervisor meetings is too long”
• “feel very supported by both supervisors”
• Supervisor helps with Language especially pronunciation

Chemistry
• Department provides lots of training programmes to suit different needs e.g. lab safety
• Post-doc students help if supervisors are busy
• Group support from peers
What did we learn about contact hours?

- Contact hours were between 2 and 4 hours a day
- Both PhD and Masters students had contact from classes/lectures/training

PhD
- Supervisor meetings last between 1 and two hours
- Supervisors also attend weekly group meetings with PhD students
- Generally meet with supervisor once a month
Masters students
• All have personal tutors and meet with them ‘as and when’
• Between 8 and 10 hours of lectures a week
Usefulness of AEPC for departments - Reading

• The reading circles were very useful
• How to read quickly is the most important
• How to find useful information books etc.
• Choosing articles and presenting them
• Reading general books from the mobile library
• Not sure because I haven’t started reading yet
Usefulness of AEPC for departments - Writing

• How to write – sentence structure
• Ideas about plagiarism, references and the structure of the sentences
• Hedging
• Coherence
• Drafting and re-drafting
• Writing longer essays than IELTS writing
Usefulness of AEPC for departments – Listening & Speaking

• How to give a presentation in subject area
• Extended listening
• How to take notes in lectures
• How to give an opinion
• How to lead a discussion
• How to enter a discussion
What did we learn about the PG Open Day?

- Where the department is and how to get there on the first day
- Found out about the course and met supervisor
We need speaking classes that help us talk to other students and tutors not just academic speaking.

Need to have more of an even balance between academic listening & speaking and speaking

‘speaking…gives confidence and low confidence affects coursework and ability to ask questions’

“I can listen, that’s the skill I do best, but there is a gap between my listening and my speaking when I talk to my supervisor.”

We need speaking classes that help us talk to other students and tutors not just academic speaking.”
Some thoughts/suggestions from the students:

Need more sentence level writing

“The most important skill in ELTC was writing and the most important part of that was sentence structure. The Academic Writing was good but grammar and writing a sentence are the most important.”

“The most difficult thing was paraphrasing and summarizing but in time I will get better at this – I need to be able to write more clearly…my grammar isn’t very good.”
Some thoughts/suggestions from the students:

Need different types of writing

“My course is practical, we have a lot of assignments but not like extended writing at ELTC – I have to design games and do a group project for a client. I think ELTC should look at e-mails too. We need to write a lot of these in Semester 1”

“I need to e-mail my supervisor and the lecturers that give me training but I’m worried about … how to do this”
Some thoughts/suggestions from the students:

Need more reading

“If you can read more, your writing will improve. We need more reading circles”

“without reading you cannot write and you cannot know anything about your subject”

“Reading is the key to everything but there should be more on AEPC…you can’t develop reading easily”
Implications for AEPC:

'for an EAP syllabus...the objective will usually require the performance of a larger task that involves the integration of a number of different types of knowledge' Widdowson, 1983: 90 cited in Bruce, 2015: 55)

(for us part of that knowledge is the voice of the students themselves)

'The design of an EAP syllabus involves making connections between the present situation and target needs of learners' (Bruce, 2015: 65)
Implications for AEPC:

'In order for EAP courses to be helpful for students, they need to be relevant and prepare students effectively for their future study' (Bruce, 2015: 83)
Implications for AEPC:

- Re-think PhD/Masters
- Re-introduce Functional (social?) English to curriculum
- Vary the writing tasks, length of task and hand in dates
- Abandon/reduce Exam Preparation classes
- Weekly reading circles
- More integrated practical use of technology
Implications of transitions for Prospective Students:

- Improved confidence
- Greater awareness of the work load they will face
- Better interpersonal abilities
- Improved adaptability to UK HE environment
- Further engagement with discourse communities
References:


Some Questions

• How does what we have done/are doing compare with your institution?
• What have you found to be the main challenges of transitions/tracking?
To Discover And Understand.