

[P23] The MMU First Year 'Shock Absorber' project

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Keywords: retention; support; assessment; student experience; transition

Introduction

The First Year Shock Absorber project is a three-year collaborative National Teaching Fellowship Institutional project funded by the Higher Education Academy in 2007. The aim of the project is to enhance the experience of First Year undergraduate students to promote future student success. The project is informed by institutional, national and international research, for example, that of Yorke and Longden (2007) and the Student Transition and Retention (STAR) project. These projects have indicated that students leave programmes of study, often during the first few weeks of the programme, for a number of reasons including those shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Why students leave programmes of study

| Issues leading to withdrawal |
|---|
| Personal |
| Financial |
| Having chosen the wrong course |
| Feelings of isolation |
| Lack of peer and friendship networks |
| Feelings of being overwhelmed (by new situation and the volume of information they receive) |
| The remoteness of staff compared to previous educational experiences |
| Uncertainty regarding level and assessment criteria |
| The lack of timely and meaningful feedback on assignments |

The main objectives of the First Year Shock Absorber project are to:

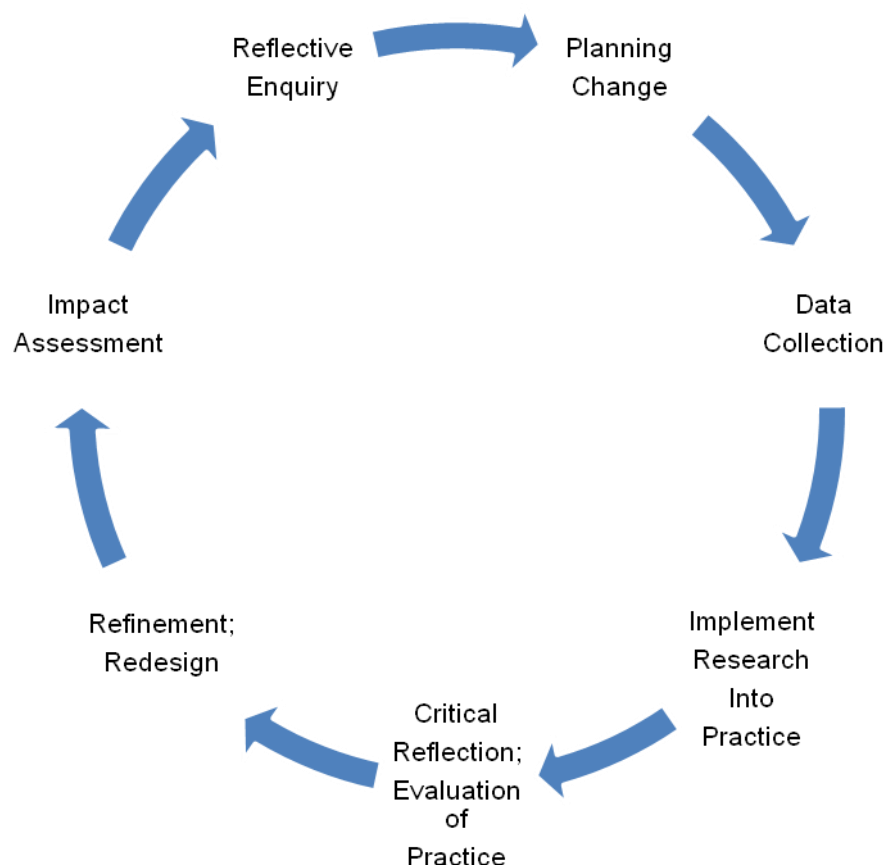
- produce a flexible and adaptable 'toolkit' for interconnected learning, teaching and assessment interventions for first year (level 4) undergraduate students from pre-entry, through induction and into the early weeks of year one;
- offer innovatory methods to engage first year undergraduate students and increase their confidence, knowledge and scholarship skills; and
- focus on the topic for the first assignment to alleviate the 'shock' or anxiety often associated with early experiences in Higher Education.

The project is ongoing and involves first year students in Law, Photography and Biological/Biomedical Sciences (BBS) at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU); Archaeology at Liverpool University; and Social Work at Stockport College. This paper discusses the work of the Shock Absorber project during its first year as it relates to the BBS team at MMU.

Methodology

The Shock Absorber follows an action research methodology (Fig 1; Altrichter *et al*, 1993). In Year 1 of the project this involved the collection and analysis of data from students by questionnaires and focus groups and the design of Shock Absorber interventions to be used for the next cohort of new students. Year 2 of the project involved the implementation of interventions, further collection and analysis of data from students and refinement and redesign of interventions following critical reflection.

Figure 1: The Action Research Cycle



In Year 1, a comprehensive questionnaire was delivered to 135 Level 4 BBS students during a classroom session at the end of the first term. The students were asked questions on a five point Likert scale for agreement with statements around the following items:

- their expectations before they came to MMU;
- information received before they came to MMU;
- the initial weeks of their course;
- about the information they had currently; and
- how they felt currently about their programme and its delivery.

They were also asked to give free-form comments on their first term experience.

Results and Discussion

The results of the questionnaires are summarised in Table 2 in terms of the percentage agreement with questionnaire statements. The results indicate that student expectations pre-entry matched what was expected of them when they came to MMU. However, a number of students claimed not to have received information pre-entry on a number of issues, including how much support they would receive for their learning. While academic staff know that all students were sent information on timetables, workload, teaching methods, prior to entry, this did not appear to have registered with the students themselves, possibly due to information overload. The issue of support, for example for IT and PDP, was still current at the end of the first term, indicating a need to provide accessible information at intervals throughout the first term.

Table 2. Percentage agreement with questionnaire items. Note that there were multiple questions in each theme, indicated by key phrases below.

| Question Themes | 20-39% Low level of agreement | 40-59% | 60-79% | 80-100% High level of agreement |
|---|--|---|--|--|
| <p>Expectations pre-entry:</p> <p>I expected to have to:</p> | | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • contribute in class • spend most of my time with large groups of students | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be independent • have individual support • work with others • complete an assignment in the first term • manage my own workload • use IT for learning |
| <p>Information pre-entry:</p> <p>I received information on:</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how much individual support I would get from staff | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • timetables and level of attendance expected • workload • teaching methods • getting individual support for learning • using IT for learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how I would be assessed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the content of the programme |
| <p>Information by end of induction:</p> <p>By the end of induction I had received information about:</p> | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • getting individual support for learning • who to approach if I had a personal issue • what to do to get additional support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how to use the library • assessment criteria and regulations • teaching methods • how to see my tutor • IT elements of course | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • course content • my timetable • how I would be assessed • submitting work and receiving feedback |
| <p>Current information:</p> <p>By the end of the first term I knew about:</p> | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PDP arrangements • how much individual support I would get • how much IT support I would get | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using the library • working in small groups • how to meet my tutor • getting additional support for learning • who to approach if I had a personal issue | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • course content • making the most of lectures • how I would be assessed • assessment criteria and regulations |

While the BBS programmes at MMU have retention rates well within targets for the post '92 sector, interventions may still be necessary to allay the 'shock' of transition to university. The programme team are already undertaking activities shown by research to help this transition process, but more may be needed in areas specifically identified in this study. In year 2 of the project, some pre-entry

interventions were identified and undertaken. For example, students were directed to an MMU website (Greaves, 2007) designed to assist students in studying on-line. This pre-entry activity was linked to on-line activities in, and after, early induction to support them with skills required for completing their first assignment.

In the second year of the project the questionnaire was split into three parts and delivered at more appropriate times namely during induction week (for questions about pre-entry expectations and information), in October (for questions about induction) and in December (for current knowledge). Further interventions in year 3 (2009-10) are currently being designed to complement those introduced in year 2. The Shock Absorber project is also contributing to a number of other institutional projects at MMU, particularly those related to the student experience.

References

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