



The MMU First Year Shock Absorber Project

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Introduction

The First Year Shock Absorber project is a three-year collaborative National Teaching Fellowship Institutional project funded by the HEA in 2007 and involving MMU, the University of Liverpool, and Stockport College. The project aims to:

- enhance the experience of First Year undergraduate students to promote future student success.

This will be achieved by:

- producing a flexible and adaptable 'toolkit' for interconnected learning, teaching and assessment interventions for first year (level 4) undergraduate students.
- offering innovative methods to engage students and increase their confidence, knowledge and scholarship skills.

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. The project is now in its second year.

This poster discusses the work of the Shock Absorber during its first year as it relates to Biological and Biomedical Science (BBS) programmes at MMU.

Methodology

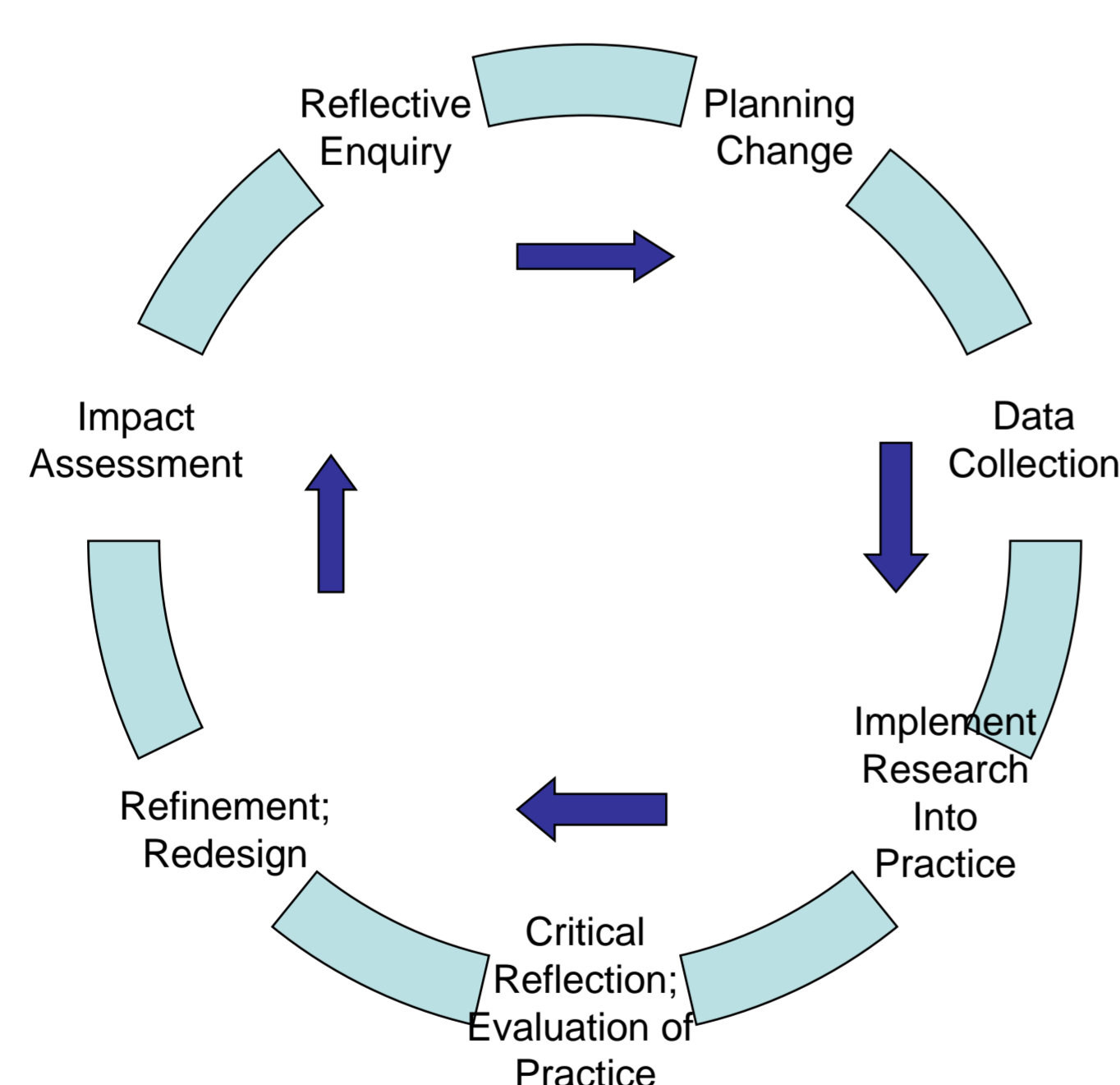
The Shock Absorber follows an action research methodology (Fig 1). In Year 1 of the project this involved:

- Collection of data from students (questionnaires and focus groups)
- Analysis of data and design of Shock Absorber interventions, including pre-entry.

In Year 2:

- Implementation of interventions
- Collection of data from students (questionnaires and focus groups)
- Critical reflection
- Refinement and redesign of interventions

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 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
- how they felt currently about their programme and its delivery

plus

- information about themselves and free-form comments on their first term experience.

Results

Analysis of the questionnaire (Table 1) indicated that student expectations at pre-entry were realistic. However, of concern is the large number of students who claim not to have received information on areas of importance to their transition, particularly in relation to support. Whether the student perceptions are accurate or not (staff report that all students were sent this information), clearly the information needs to be more succinct and delivered as and when required.

The questionnaire indicates that students were well informed by the end of induction but information about support remains an issue for around half the students even by the end of the first term. Clearly, students most at risk of leaving a programme need to be fully informed about how to access support.

Table 1. 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
Expectations pre-entry: I expected to have to:			-contribute in class -spend most of my time with large groups of students	-be independent -have individual support -work with others -complete an assignment in the first term -manage my own workload -use IT for learning
Information pre-entry: I received information on:	-how much individual support I would get from staff	-timetables and level of attendance expected -workload -teaching methods -getting individual support for learning -using IT for learning	-how I would be assessed	-the content of the programme
Information by end of induction: by the end of induction I had received information about:		-getting individual support for learning -who to approach if I had a personal issue -what to do to get additional support	-how to use the library -assessment criteria and regulations -teaching methods -how to see my tutor -IT elements of course	-course content -my timetable -how I would be assessed -submitting work and receiving feedback
Current information: By the end of the first term I knew about:		-PDP arrangements -how much individual support I would get -how much IT support I would get	-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	-course content -making the most of lectures -how I would be assessed -assessment criteria and regulations

Discussion

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. 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

- Greaves, N. (2007) *Are your students ready to study in an online or blended learning environment?* Learning and Teaching in Action **7(2)** 19-23 (available online at <http://www.celt.mmu.ac.uk/tia/issue16/greaves.php>)
- Student Transition and Retention: *the STAR project*. <http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star/index.htm> (accessed May 2009)
- Yorke, M. and Longden, B. (2007) *Students' perspectives on the first year experience - initial findings from the first year experience survey*. www.heacademy.ac.uk (accessed May 2009)