

## 7 Steps to: Delivering an Effective Immersive Module

### Overview

Entry into HE is a challenging time for all students, regardless of their background and experience. For some it can involve the move to a new town, away from the familiarity of home. For all it will present them with new networks of peers, and different approaches to learning, which emphasise independence (Krause et al., 2005). It is not surprising therefore, that the majority of students who withdraw from HE study do so within the first few weeks, primarily because they do not fully integrate into social and academic communities associated with university life (Reay, 2007).

The likelihood of withdrawal is particularly acute for those students entering HE from non-traditional backgrounds. Such students can experience the transition to university differently, with concerns about their level of preparation or awareness of the requirements for HE as contributing to withdrawal (Reay, 2007). The successful induction of students has been identified as essential to promoting integration, retention and achievement (Porter & Swing, 2006).

Short induction periods prior to the start of teaching are now common in HE, but research has recognised the value of extended induction periods within the early stages of university life as enhancing integration and student success (Yorke & Thomas, 2003; Bovill et al., 2008). Such 'immersive' induction can support the development of contextual and realistic understandings and expectations of university-level study, effective use of feedback, supportive peer/tutor networks, thus fostering a sense of belonging and engagement with the subject (Tinto, 2006). Effective induction can mediate many of the factors that result in the withdrawal of students from non-traditional backgrounds (Edward & Middleton, 2002; Tinto, 2006).

This '7 Steps' considers how an immersive module can be used to integrate students successfully into university life.

### 1. Promote the early integration of students.

Academic and social activities can create opportunities where students can become friends and work together. 'Low (academic) risk' activities such as field days, quizzes etc. can be used in the first few days of a module to encourage students to work as a team and engage with discipline-related knowledge or skills. Students usually respond favourably to such activities when they are perceived as relevant to their programme of study (Edward & Middleton, 2002), allowing them to personalise or apply disciplinary knowledge (Fouberg, 2000). Pedagogies that promote collaborative working and peer networking (group work, problem-based learning) should be incorporated into the delivery of the module as they support students in developing valuable time management, interpersonal and communication skills they will draw upon in their future studies (Gibbs, 1995).

### 2. Encourage active learning.

Active learning involves use of learning activities designed to engage students and develop a sense of ownership of the subject and their own learning process. It is recognised as resulting in meaningful engagement with course content, fostering skills of questioning and analysis (Andrews et al., 2011). This leads to students developing a deeper understanding of the topics being studied. Active learning is integral to the principles of group work, problem-based or inquiry-based learning. It also moves away from the more traditional 'didactic' forms of learning to connectionist approaches which help students understand theory within the context in which it occurs (Andrews et al., 2011). However, students do require guidance to begin with – most will not be prepared to take full control of their learning from day one (Bovill et al., 2008). Lecturers are encouraged to adopt a 'facilitation' role whereby they provide discipline-based input but use questioning and activities to allow students to take ownership for their learning and develop an awareness, early on, of what HE-level study involves.

### 3. Integrate study-skills holistically.

Quickly developing a grasp of skills such as critical thinking, information searching, analysis and reflection can provide students with a sense of confidence and preparation for the rigours of university-level study (Bovill et al., 2008). However, unless they are contextualised within the discipline, students often struggle to understand the skills or see their relevance. Programme teams are encouraged to design in-class activities and formative or summative assignments that integrate generic study skills with disciplinary-focused context. The experts in some skills may come from outside of the programme (e.g. library skills, using DLE). Where this is the case, it is important to coordinate between external and disciplinary instructors to ensure that what students experience is a seamlessly contextualised introduction.

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## 4. Map out the teaching and learning activities.

First year students need to develop an awareness of what is expected of them with respect to independent study, and the immersive module can be used to achieve this. Use a personal timetable to map out all the teaching and learning activities students are expected to engage with to meet a module's learning outcomes (e.g. reading or session preparation and group activities as well as assessment deadlines (formative / summative), lectures, seminars, fieldwork, labwork or studio time). This provides an indication of the level of work and commitment required of them, and encourages the development of 'good study habits'.

## 5. Use teaching spaces creatively.

Within the immersive module it is recommended that, where possible, sessions should be two hours. This is to encourage a move away from didactic lectures to active sessions, where students take a greater role in directing their learning, and are more likely to engage in deeper learning (Ramsden, 1992). Longer sessions enable the use of approaches such as group work, problem or inquiry-based learning as students can engage in more sustained tasks during class time. To support the use of such approaches, lecturers are encouraged to consider more explicitly how they use teaching spaces (Neary et al., 2010). For example, use should be made of breakout study spaces for small group discussions where possible. Other options include group tasks around campus before reconvening in the teaching room; or using activities such as a 'silent discussion' – where students contribute via post-it notes or on flip chart paper to limit noise when teaching big groups interactively.

## 6. Introduce assessment early and arrange feedback opportunities.

The value of familiarising students with the practice of giving, receiving and responding to feedback is firmly established within the literature - most students do not have these skills when entering university (e.g. Carless, 2006; Nichol, 2010). Feedback enables students "to judge the quality of what they are producing and be able to regulate what they are doing during the doing of it (Sadler, 1989: 121). Providing assessment and feedback early gives students a chance to learn this essential skill straight away. Moreover, early feedback can help students build confidence in their learning, which aids student retention, provided it is presented in a positive and encouraging way (Carless, 2006).

## 7. Incorporate technology where it supports delivery and promotes flexibility.

Immersing students effectively into university life should involve real experience with choice and ownership of their learning (Bovill et al. 2008). Essential to this is making full use of the Moodle. Ensuring module content is uploaded promptly and follows the module teaching can help students choose how they want to engage with the material best. This can also support students who may arrive late or miss sessions due to illness. Moodle activities such as podcasts, quizzes and discussion forums can also be used to prepare students for taught sessions and offer different paths to the same goal. Inclusive approaches to assessment, with different options available, is another good way to provide flexibility and make students take an active role in their learning. In-class technologies such as 'clickers' or use of Twitter can engage students in activities during sessions (Bovill et al., 2008).

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