PedRIO Research/ Teaching Fellowship Award Scheme: Final Report

Name of key contact (project leader): Dr Rebecca Turner

Department: Teaching and Learning Support (PedRIO)

Names of other staff involved: Dr David Morrison, Professor Debby Cotton, Professor Pauline Kneale with additional support from Chloe Harvey, Emily Danvers, Dr Samantha Child & Sebastian Stevens

Title of project: Evaluation of the Curriculum Enrichment Project

Type of project: Evaluation

Keywords: Curriculum design, student induction, immersive learning, student retention, interdisciplinarity, academic literacies

Aims of project:
- Capture the experiences and outcomes of those first year students in the CEP ‘early adopter’ group;
- Compare the experiences of the CEP ‘early adopter’ group students with those studying under the traditional model of curriculum delivery;
- Examine lecturer experiences of adapting their teaching and adopting different pedagogies in order to align with the principles of CEP.
- Examine the design and delivery of Plymouth Plus across the University, considering specifically how staff have addressed the concept of ‘interdisciplinary’.

Background/context to project:
Students’ entry into higher education has been acknowledged as a challenging and potentially difficult time (Reay, 2002). A student’s ability to negotiate the academic demands of a programme of study and integrate into peer networks is essential to their retention and success (Krause et al., 2005; Tinto, 2003). Consequently universities have placed increase attention of the process of student induction. Structured programmes of support to promote integration, including and guidance from academic staff regarding expectations of university-level study, are now commonplace (e.g. Yorke & Thomas, 2003). Such activities are focused at the programme level (e.g. Edward & Middleton, 2002), yet researchers such as Tinto, (2003) advocate the value of a whole-institutional approach to student induction.

Plymouth University has responded to this by restructuring the first year undergraduate experience, with the emphasis placed upon immersing students within their programme of study. This is part of the wider Curriculum Enhancement Programme that is been rolled out across the University from September 2014.

Methods used: Ethnographic observations, student surveys / focus groups, staff interviews, feedback captured through module evaluations and review of institutional data sets (e.g. SPQ / retention data)

Evaluation of the immersive modules 2014-15 / 2015-16 academic years. This included modules drawn from the Faculties of Arts & Humanities, Business, Health & Science. NB: these represent headline findings, the outcomes of each ethnographic study were reported directly to the Module Lead.
Briefly, the key findings can be summarised as follows:

- **Building a sense of community**: There were positive responses to immersion in the discipline and working on only one module in their first weeks at University. Students felt it allowed them to develop good relationships with peers / teaching teams.

- **Enhanced sense of preparation**: The immersive module provided an indication of university-level study, introducing different ways in which students would be taught and expected to learn.

- **Introduction of Study Skills**: Overall modules were framed with respect to the founding principles of each discipline and essential study skills. Careful presentation of these skills was necessary, since when they were not contextualised to the discipline they were poorly received by students.

- **A range of pedagogic approaches were used**, with varying levels of success:
  - Seminars were received positively; students felt they created opportunities for asking questions about lectures or assessments, allowed students to expand on, or clarify topics of interest. They also enabled students to develop connections with staff and peers.
  - Most sessions were two-hours long; however, where staff sought to ‘lecture’ for two-hours this was unpopular. The ‘business’ module was taught through a sequence of workshops, placing the emphasis on student-led learning. Students liked these interactive forms of teaching; however, in some cases students said lectures were too short to convey the knowledge they needed to use in the interactive sessions.
  - Unsuitable teaching spaces often had a negative impact on the use interactive approaches.

In order to maximise student learning, especially where pedagogic approaches may be new or not what students may have anticipated to encounter in HE, value was identified in introducing the approach and discussing rationale for its use and expectations for student engagement.

- **A variety of methods of assessment were used to assess students’ learning formatively / summatively**: Careful framing of formative assessment (e.g. peer assessment) was essential to prepare students to engage with the process and ensure they perceived it as a worthwhile activity. Quick turnaround in feedback was appreciated but staff noted this was a considerable workload.

- **A range of digital technologies were used** (including social media). While some students enjoyed using social media (as it allowed them to participate in discussions ‘anonymously’), some complained of an overload of different technologies (e.g. Moodle, webinars, social media). Where only the DLE was used consistently, student responses to technology were more positive.

**Student Transitions: overview of the first year’s 1st impressions survey 2014-15 / 2015-16 academic years):**

- There were several significant improvements in student views between 2014-15 and 2015-16. Most of these aligned with CEP design guidelines and goals (e.g. improvements documented around students’ experiences of either possessing or developing the necessary study skills, contact with peers and staff, confidence in meeting the workload, accurately student expectations, and receiving feedback on more work.)

- Students did record mixed responses to the level of group work, with an increase in the number of students who were reluctant to join in class discussions. This matched open comments suggesting a small subset of students who did not appreciate group work. This may be due to issues around social anxiety or concerns over the process of group work, which can be a challenging approach for many students to engage with in the absence of effective support or framing.
- Students were receiving feedback on assessed with in a greater number of ways, with incidences of written feedback on their work reducing but greater provision of feedback through platforms such as Moodle documented. Students appreciated this change.
- A complex pattern emerged around students experiences of belonging, which were noteworthy and have been reviewed and discussed within PedRIO.

**Student retention and withdrawal data: 2014-15**
These data were obtained from CIS, based on individual student record (enrolment) data used in the HESA return. The ‘nursing’ data were provided by FoH from their own data returns since changes in course codes means these data were not easily accessible via CIS.

**Data reviewed:**
- Retention – based on the presence of an active student record in the next academic year.
- Withdrawal – based on student records that are no longer active and have been removed from the system

A ‘mismatch’ in retention and withdrawal data represents students that are still active enrolments but they have not progressed due to failing the module or interruption of studies for example.

**Key findings (see also Table 1)**
14 of the 18 programmes for which data is available have improved their retention rates after CEP implementation. Only 4 of the 18 programmes had a higher withdrawal rate after CEP implementation and this represented a total of 4 students from a cohort of 809. In 2013-14 59 students left these programmes within the first academic year, this fell to 25 students in the CEP early adopter year. This represents a potential financial saving £612,000 (£9000 x 34 x 2) assuming they are returned for two further years.
Table 1: Student retention & withdrawal data from the 2014-15 early adopter programmes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme</th>
<th>2013-14 (pre CEP)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>2014-15 (early adopter year)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Retention %</td>
<td>Withdrawal</td>
<td>Headcount**</td>
<td>Retention %</td>
<td>Withdrawal</td>
<td>Headcount**</td>
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<td>95.92</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>BSc Business Management (fast track)</td>
<td>74.51</td>
<td>7.84</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>77.14</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>BSc Business Management (3 year)</td>
<td>77.27</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>72.32</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>87.04</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>90.91</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>BA International Business with French</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>83.33</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>94.74</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>59</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>25</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Plymouth Plus – Staff Interviews:
Plymouth Plus ran intensively in the first four weeks of the second semester for all first year students (excluding Nursing and Midwifery) as a set of offerings designed to introduce student choice and realise the benefits of interdisciplinarity to student learning / development.

Although choice and interdisciplinary / collaborative working across Schools/Faculties were inherent to design of PP, this did not manifest itself in the way that was originally envisioned, as many programmes only had one ‘choice’ of PP module. Where choice was permitted, students did not take advantage of the opportunities open to them. Only 2.07% enrolled in modules outside of their faculty.

A provisional analysis of interviews held with a sample of academic staff involved in the design and delivery of PP identified the following outcomes:

- All interviewees were very positive about the principles and goals behind PP (e.g. interdisciplinarity / student choice). From the sample of modules included in the evaluation only one clearly embraced the ‘principles’ of PP, in that it brought multiple disciplines together in the design of the module and was based on student team work and collaboration. For some they saw PP as creating the potential for cross institutional collaboration and innovation, but in most cases this had not been realised and represented a source of disappointment. Instead most Schools ran separate modules open to only students within the school. Further, many Schools did not permit their student to choose modules elsewhere. Indeed, several interviewees indicated that plans for future iterations of PP may result in more subject-specific modules, not less.
- Several modules focused on generic skills / themes (e.g. critical thinking, ethics, CV writing). While this can allow for interdisciplinary, modules were instead framed in discipline-specific terms and only open to the School in which the module was based.
- The timing of PP was a concern for the most respondents. Most felt students needed a stronger grounding in their discipline before capitalising on interdisciplinary opportunities.
- Additional consistent concerns of staff regarding designing effective PP modules were:
  - Concerns with meeting core/professional requirements of subject
  - Administrative challenges (e.g. timetabling)
  - Lack of support from colleagues/Schools (e.g. to meet the needs of immersive teaching / course design)
  - Imposed limits on student choice
  - Workload (e.g. short turn around for assessments, intensive delivery, module design)

Dissemination

Internal reports and presentations
Report presented to the CEP Project Steering group January 2015
Presentation to the Programme Leaders Forum February 2015
Report presented to the CEP Project Steering group October 2015 (with an additional written report summarising work to date)
Report presented to the CEP Project Steering group January 2016
Revisions to the PU webpages December 2015
Report submitted to the Board of Governors January 2016
Teaching and Learning resources & workshops

The outcomes of this study have informed:

- 7 steps to delivering an effective immersive module: [https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/uploads/production/document/path/5/5988/7_steps_to_Delivering_an_Effective_Immersive_Module.pdf](https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/uploads/production/document/path/5/5988/7_steps_to_Delivering_an_Effective_Immersive_Module.pdf)
- 3 T&L Support Workshops on designing and delivering immersive modules
- Several staff away days across Faculty of Business
- One-to-one meetings with academic staff to discuss the design and development of their immersive modules.

In the 2016-17 academic year T&L Support will be developing a series of resources around promoting interdisciplinary through PP which are anticipated to include a 7 steps and a two hour workshop.

Conference presentations


Publications

Turner, R., Hurth, V., Cotton, D., Stevens, S., Child, S., Morrison, D. & Kneale, P. (in review). Using a structured timetable to manage first year students’ expectations of
independent study. Case study submitted to an edited volume entitled 'Transitions: in, through and out of higher education'.

Turner, R., Morrison, D., Cotton, D., Child, S., Stevens, S., Nash, P. & Kneale, P. (in review). Enhancing the transition and retention of first year undergraduates through the use of an immersive module. Submitted to Teaching in HE.