



Report on Transition Programme 2005 Pilot

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A) Department of Chemistry, with Natural Sciences: Report on Transition Programme Pilot 2005

B) Institute of Archaeology: Report on Transition Pilot 2005: Mentor Programme

C) Notes from meeting with Departments, 9 December 2005

Executive Summary

The Transition Programme has been introduced at UCL as an element of its Access Agreement. It has been a pilot initiative for the 2005/6 academic year and is designed to support first year undergraduate students as they move into higher education. A range of projects have been set up, both in departments and central UCL, to address the academic, social and practical aspects of transition to university.

In the initial eight month Transition Programme pilot period, it was intended that the Transition Project Officer should:

- gather information on existing levels of support for first year undergraduate students, and scope the possibilities for future expansion of the transition programme
- develop, deliver and evaluate pilot programmes with a few departments
- create central resources available to all students

In summary, the following progress has been made:

Audit on existing levels of support, and possibilities for future expansion

The Audit of Transition Initiatives gathered responses from 29 Departments and three Faculties. While this is fewer than half of the departments, it presents a good picture of the range of support strategies for first year undergraduate students and, most importantly, provided a forum to find out which departments are interested in becoming involved in future.

Pilot programmes in departments

It was unfortunate that the invitation to take part in the pilot was not accepted by as many departments as first hoped. The response in future may be improved by a change to the way in which departments are selected. However, the Department of Chemistry, the Natural Sciences programme and the Institute of Archaeology have been excellent to work with, embracing the ideas with enthusiasm and making real efforts to engage students and staff in the pilot programmes. Other departments will be able to learn from their experience to create future transition programmes. While this report includes student evaluation of the programmes and suggests recommendations for next year, eventual outcomes – particularly student progression – will not be available until after the examination period in 2006.

The second and third year student mentors have also been committed, professional and provided very useful feedback. There is now a Human Resources approved and evaluated job specification suitable for departmental adaptation, and templates for a mentor handbook and training.

Central Resources

The provision of new resources and involvement in a number of UCL meetings and events has helped to raise awareness within UCL of transition issues and possibilities for improving first year student support. The creation of a Transition Programme Management Board provides advice to the programme and a forum for disseminating information to UCL staff about transition. Transition resources now available to all UCL students include the Transition website, the First Year Weblog and 'First Year @ UCL: A Quick Guide'. First year undergraduate students also contributed to a survey of their expectations of university life, and the more than 800 responses indicate that students are keen to share their feelings about starting university. Staff in many areas of UCL will find the results of this survey useful, both for planning first year support and for providing information to prospective students.

A discussion on the future of the Transition Programme, and a summary of recommendations, appear at the end of this report.

Background

The introduction of a Transition Programme at UCL

Transition and the first year undergraduate experience are becoming increasingly important in universities in the UK and internationally. First year is the time when students are most likely to consider withdrawing from their programme and attrition is a major concern for many institutions. Even at UCL, where overall retention figures are high, retention varies considerably between departments.

The Transition Programme has been introduced at UCL for the 2005/6 academic year as a pilot initiative and is designed to support first year undergraduate students as they move into higher education. It is part of UCL's Access Agreement and is being put in place in recognition of the support needs of an increasingly diverse student body, including international students and those from a non-traditional background. The programme should not, however, be seen only as a Widening Participation (WP) initiative. At most higher education institutions where successful transition programmes exist, these programmes are inclusive of all students and viewed as an integral element of the universities' teaching, learning and support strategies.

Transition is institutionalised practice in most universities in the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina runs a large annual, international conference and has a large body of research and resources available. In the UK, the HEFCE-funded STAR Project – Student Transition and Retention – is building up similar resources and links.

First Year Support at UCL: Results of the Transition Audit

The Transition Audit was undertaken in October 2005, via an email memo and survey sent to departmental tutors. Its main objectives were to provide more detailed information about induction and transition support initiatives currently operating at UCL and to offer departments the opportunity to express an interest in possibly participating in the next stage of the Transition pilot.

This report provides the UCL Department of Educational Liaison, and any incoming Transition Project Officer, with information to guide future discussions with departments. Colleagues from those departments which have expressed interest have been invited to attend a meeting so that they can learn more about progress on the current pilot, and gather information to help them make an informed decision about how they might proceed in the next academic year.

The audit provided information on:

- Induction week activities in departments: standard and additional
- Ongoing first year support in departments: standard and additional
- UCL-wide issues that department respondents identify as needing attention
- Interest in future transition developments

Responses

Three Faculties and 29 Departments or Degree Programmes responded. 17 departments indicated some interest in learning more about future developments of the Transition Programme.

Department- or faculty-based support

Induction Week

Most departments include all or most of the following activities in their Induction Programme. Some departments have one or two days of induction, after which lectures begin. Others have an induction programme stretching across a week and formal teaching begins in Week 2. All of these activities are the minimum required to ensure students have the information they need to begin their studies, navigate the department and UCL, and know who to ask for assistance.

- Registration with the Department and UCL
- Welcome talks given by a range of academic staff including Head of Department, Faculty Dean, Departmental Tutor
- Some departments also invite staff from the Student Union, Careers, Counselling and the Voluntary Services Unit to speak about services and opportunities at UCL.
- Introductions to subjects
- Introductions to key department staff
- Initial meetings with personal tutors
- Library tours
- Information Systems induction
- Laboratory familiarisation and safety sessions
- Encouragement to attend the Student Union's Freshers' Fayre
- Most have a student handbook, or a comprehensive undergraduate website with contact details for the department and links to other parts of UCL.

Induction week: additional activities

Many departments offer activities in addition to the standard Induction.

- Field trips; eg Archaeology 'Prim Tech': an experimental archaeology field trip
- Study skills lectures: eg Chemistry, 'Introduction to University Study'
- Guide to getting the most out of personal tutor, eg Biology: 'Getting help and picking up skills: The role of your personal tutor'.
- Visits to relevant research centres or museums, eg Anthropology visit to British Museum
- Meetings with later year student mentors or buddies, eg Law Society runs a 'parent' scheme
- Websites for joiners with detailed outline of what to expect in first year, sample timetables, links to student support etc.
- Explicitly addressing transition issues in induction talks, eg Economics.

Ongoing support throughout first term or first year: standard initiatives

All departments also offer support extending beyond the first week, in the form of Personal Tutors. While the role of Personal Tutors is essentially the same in all departments, some have more structured and frequent schedules of meetings and detailed student progress forms to complete, while others are less structured and rely on a student proactively seeking help from their tutor.

Other support offered in most departments includes the availability of Departmental Tutors and other staff with an 'open-door' policy, and student societies which organise social functions and sometimes seminars and other events.

Ongoing support: Additional initiatives

Some departments offer extra programmes that extend beyond the induction period. Most are designed to facilitate skills development, increase peer interaction, or to monitor attendance and track students who may be at risk of not progressing successfully.

- Series of feedback/progress meetings with group: eg Institute of Archaeology Weekly Review and Monday Discussion Groups
- Series of study skills lectures/workshops as a compulsory, assessed part of the course: eg Geography Writing & Analysis in Geography; STS 'Research Methods in Science and Technology Studies'
- Writing assistance from John Hands, Royal Literary Fund Fellow (available to all UCL students, situated within History of Art Department)
- Peer Assisted Learning: eg Faculty of Laws, Biochemistry
- Monitoring of attendance; persistently absent students are offered support if necessary: eg Computer Science, Economics
- Personal tutors monitor Key Skills development: eg Biology

Recommendation: sharing best practice

While not actually known as 'Transition Programmes', these additional department initiatives could be called so. They constitute good transition practice in that they offer targeted support to help first year students adjust to the academic and other demands of university-level study. They could be used as models for departments wishing to improve their first year programmes.

UCL-wide issues identified by audit respondents

Student awareness

One of the ongoing challenges is how to inform students of the existence of student services, and then to encourage them to make use of them. As noted by one audit respondent:

'Getting certain messages over to all students including where to get advice if experiencing financial, medical or other personal problems is a never-ending task. We are constantly searching for better and more effective ways of achieving this'.

Although students are given all of this information during induction, they are often overwhelmed by the volume of information at this time and only absorb what they see is immediately relevant to them. Departments provide induction packs and handbooks but since these are produced by individual departments, there is no consistent, central source of information other than the Current Students website. Since students may take some time to become familiar with the site and to use it regularly, the information needs to be communicated in forms in addition to online.

Recommendation: Raising awareness of services and sources of information

The development of the Transition website and the 'Quick Guide' (see below) as easy, practical and central sources of information available beyond Induction could go some way towards achieving greater awareness. Transition Programmes should also be designed to ensure students are informed about the support available to them, by delivering the information over time.

Academic writing and study skills

One potential gap, identified by a number of audit respondents, is the provision of centrally-administered and funded study skills support. While it may be assumed that students can approach their personal and other tutors for support in this area, not all tutors have the skills or the time and many departments see a need for academic writing and other skills training to be provided at UCL level:

'If suitable staff can be found, academic writing courses could be made available as evening classes, like foreign language classes. However, it is vital that these classes remain free of charge or (if necessary to discourage timewasters) with only a nominal fee.'

'Centralised courses on how to study at University would be very useful'.

UCL does have a Royal Literary Fund Fellow, John Hands, who is available for individual appointments with students needing assistance with writing skills, or to run workshops with departments. This service is very much under-utilised, possibly

because the information is only available on the History of Art website so students of other departments either do not find out about Mr Hands, or do not realise they are allowed to make appointments.

The Language Centre has a range of courses about academic writing but these are aimed at international students for whom English is not their first language. CALT also offers a 10-week course called 'Writing in Academic Contexts' but it is not clear how many departments promote this course to their students as a form of support. Students may also be reluctant to devote 10 weeks to this subject. Some departments, such as Geography, offer such courses as a credit-bearing part of their degrees, so they are directly relevant for students. Many universities have Academic Skills Centres or similar, where students can make appointments with advisors or attend a range of workshops on skills ranging from essay writing to exam preparation, and these are an excellent resource for teaching staff to be able to refer students having difficulties.

UCL-wide, central, study skills support

UCL should canvass departments further, to determine the need for more, central study skills support and then investigate ways of providing this for students on a group and individual basis.

In the interim, services such as those provided by CALT, the Language Centre and The Literary Fund Fellow should be more accessible and advertised to students more widely.

Interest in future Transition Programme developments

Those departments which indicated interest in the programme were invited to a meeting on 9 December 2005, so that they can find out more about this year's pilot and the possibilities for their involvement in the 2006/7 academic year. Of 17 departments invited, nine accepted the invitation:

Anatomy, Biochemistry, Biomedical Science, Civil and Environmental Engineering, Geography, Pharmacology, Phonetics and Linguistics, Physics and Astronomy, Slade School of Fine Art.

Notes from this meeting are at Appendix C.

Note: UCL-wide support

In addition to the support systems named by departments, all first-year students can access support provided by UCL. Services such as Counselling, Rights and Advice, Disability, Careers, the International Office and the Language Centre support all students and many are invited to contribute to induction information sessions. Library Services provide a range of resources to assist new users and Information Services offer training courses in computer skills. Online support is available through the Online Support Project and UCL Discussion Board.

The UCL Union is a key provider of support services to students, with Rights and Advice, Sabbatical Officers, Clubs and Societies, Workstation and the Voluntary Services Unit offering welfare support and opportunities to get involved in campus life.

Central initiatives

Transition Programme Management Board

The Transition Board was set up to oversee the project. Its membership is

- Professor Fred Pearce, Deputy Dean of Students (Chair of the Widening Participation Sub-Committee)
- Professor John Foreman, Dean of Students
- Mr Robin Allan, Senior Tutor & Tutor to Arts and Humanities Students
- Dr Hilary Richards, Sub Dean and Faculty Tutor for Life Sciences (Biological)
- Dr Brigitte Picot, Director, Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning
- Mr Nigel Percival, Director, Department of Educational Liaison

Mr Derek Kasher, Widening Participation Officer also attends meetings.

The Board will have met three times by the publication of this report. Its role has included the selection of departments to be invited to participate in the pilot, feedback on new publications and guidance with the Transition Audit.

Recommendation: Management Board and networks

Over time, as more departments take on transition programmes, it may be necessary either to

- a) expand the membership of the Board to include representatives from the participating departments, or
- b) to create a working group of departmental representatives.

It is very useful for departments to meet to share ideas rather than operating in isolation, and the creation of a working group will help form a core group of UCL staff with experience and knowledge of transition. I am more inclined to suggest option (a), so that the advisory and practical working functions are not separated, and to avoid creating too many committees. This would mean that departments, who are investing the most time and energy in transition, have a direct stake in the management and future direction of the programme.

A meeting on December 14 discussed the future of the Transition Board and it was agreed that the Board should continue its valuable function in steering the project. Professor Fred Pearce will invite Dr Derek Tocher of Chemistry to join the Board, and in future a representative of other departments taking part in the Transition Programme will also be invited to join.

Participation in UCL meetings and events

The Transition Project Officer was invited to take part in the following meetings and events within UCL, to share information about the Transition Programme:

- Introductory presentation to staff
- Schools and Colleges Conference
- Committee for the Recruitment and Admission of Students, Widening Participation Sub-Committee
- Meeting of undergraduate admissions tutors and admissions staff
- Faculty of Arts and Humanities Faculty Teaching Committee
- Library Services Widening Participation Committee
- Committee for the Recruitment and Admission of Students

Other consultation

The Transition Project Officer was also asked for feedback on the new format of the International Student Orientation Programme (ISOP), and transition information was added to the International Student Handbook.

Transition website

The new Transition website is at www.ucl.ac.uk/transitions and can be accessed from the Prospective Students, Widening Participation and Current Students pages. The site was developed with Marcus Duran, Widening Participation Web Developer, and four current students and recent graduates. It includes practical advice about all aspects of the first year at UCL, hints from current students, recent graduates and staff, a glossary of university jargon and information about student finance and budgeting.

Eight first year undergraduates are submitting a monthly web log about their impressions of life at UCL. This will offer prospective students an insight into university life, the range of issues students encounter, and how they progress across the course of their first year.

Marcus Duran will be taking over the Transition site, including the Weblog, in the interim period while the future of the Transition project is decided.

Recommendation: Transition Website

1) Location/accessibility of the site

The site used to be easily accessible from the Current Students homepage as a left-hand-side menu item. The recent redesign of the current student website means it is now listed as the last item under 'Related Matters' on the 'Joining UCL' site. Since this website is intended to assist students throughout their first year, and not just at the point of joining, it will need a more prominent and obvious position if it is to be found by current students.

Departments should also be encouraged to create a First Year section on their student websites and link to the Transition site.

2) Future development

There is plenty of scope for future development of the site. Possible extras include more information on the practicalities of living in London, information for UCL staff, and a section for schools.

Marcus Duran has also been working on an e-mentoring project with the School of Medicine this year and there is a possibility that this could be further explored as a function on the Transition site, or with departments.

First Year @ UCL: A Quick Guide

This fold-out guide was created with Rachel Hobbs of the Student Recruitment Publications Office, Department of Educational Liaison, as a ready source of important telephone numbers and websites, a campus map, and a calendar of the academic year. This was in response to discussions with students, who said that while all of this information is available on the UCL website, they would also like something on paper which was easy to carry and quick to refer to. A copy was posted to each first year undergraduate student in the third week of term and they were encouraged to keep it in their wallet for the year. An electronic copy is also available to be downloaded from the Transition website, for students with disabilities for whom the printed version is not accessible.

Some departments, as well as the International Office, have asked for extra copies, staff themselves have said they find the cards useful, and there have also been requests for additional copies to send to prospective students as a promotional tool to demonstrate the range of services at UCL. It is also anticipated that later-year students would find it useful, with some departments having already reported that these students have asked for copies.

Feedback received includes:

'Thank you so much for the letter and guides you sent. We are always keen to make information available to our students before they enrol and will include the transitions link for next years new students. Do you plan to make these quick guides available before the start of next academic year? If so, we would be happy to hand them out to our new students upon enrolment. They are a very good idea.'

'Those nifty pocket sized directories of info for first years... are excellent – I passed one on to my colleague in my room who is the dyslexia co-ordinator for the whole of UCL and she has found it a great reference and has used it to show several first years how they can access support etc - she is very impressed with it!'

Recommendations: Quick Guide

The Quick Guide should continue to be updated and printed each academic year, and distributed earlier: for example with confirmation of offers or at registration and enrolment. Should UCL decide to provide copies for every student, a decision will need to be made about how this is funded, since Transition funds should only be used for commencing students, not the entire student body.

First Year Student Transition Survey

This UCL First Year Student Transition Survey was sent to students in August, before the commencement of their studies. It aimed to gain a closer understanding of their expectations of university life: what they were looking forward to, where their main concerns lay, and what challenges they anticipated in adjusting to university life. 27% of the first year cohort responded, representing a wide range of programmes. All respondents were offered the incentive of being entered in a draw to win an Apple iPod or one of several book vouchers.

In general, the survey will not contain any large surprises for anyone who works with first year students. It does, however, serve as a reminder of and offer an insight into the particular preoccupations of the current group of new undergraduates. Knowing more about students' feelings as they prepare to begin university can better inform transition and other support services for students so that programmes and resources, such as the new Transition website, can be designed specifically to address the areas that students are most concerned about. The very honest, detailed, often personal and sometimes very humorous manner in which students responded also indicates that they appreciated the opportunity to share their thoughts.

The results show that students are most looking forward to the social aspects of university life, followed by the independent lifestyle and then the course itself. Because making friends it is so important to them, this is also their greatest concern, followed by a range of academic concerns such as the difficulty of the course and their ability to cope with the workload. Finance is a worry for many students, as is living in London, living in halls, balancing academic and social life, and moving out of home and developing skills for living independently.

Copies of the survey were emailed to Faculty Tutors, Widening Participation Representatives, Admissions Tutors and other staff concerned with the recruitment of students and support of first years. Economics, Medicine and Phonetics & Linguists also requested the results specific to their departments.

Recommendation: First Year Student Transition Survey

The survey does not need to be administered every year: perhaps again in three years' time to determine if there are any changes. An interesting follow-up would be to survey students about their experiences at the completion of first year.

Department initiatives

A) Selection of departments for transition pilot

The Transition Board met to discuss the scope of the pilot, and decided that three departments, from a range of faculties, should be invited to take part. These departments were:

- **Chemistry:** has a very diverse student cohort and has been putting a lot of effort into student recruitment and is keen to retain these students. Dr Derek Tocher, Departmental Tutor, had already approached me and asked to be considered for inclusion in the pilot.
- **Civil Engineering:** also has a diverse student group including a large number of international students. The department appeared to be keen at first but had trouble identifying who would take on the role of coordinating the pilot in the department, so subsequently were unable to take part. They have, however, expressed interest in being involved in 2006/7, because the curriculum has been redesigned.
- **History:** has a good track-record of Widening Participation activities and it was felt that a transition programme would follow on well from these. The Head of Department decided that they would not take part due to other commitments, and felt that they already had good support for first year students.
 - **Institute of Archaeology:** The Institute was selected by the Board as a back-up should History decline and, after a period of discussion within the department, decided to participate.
 - Dr Daren Caruana, coordinator of the **Natural Sciences** programme, approached the Transition Officer to ask if these students could be part of the pilot, especially given that theirs is a new degree programme. It was decided that the Natural Sciences students would take part in the Chemistry Transition Programme, since many of them study Chemistry.

Recommendation: Selection of departments for participation in projects

The process of selecting departments, inviting them and then waiting for their answer proved slow, frustrating and less than satisfactory. Departments need time to consider their involvement and the motivation for taking on such a programme needs to come from within the department, rather than imposed from outside. In future, it would be more productive to issue a more general invitation to find out which departments have the greatest need for a transition programme and an interest in participating. (See *Transition Audit* for a list of departments that have expressed interest.)

B) Programmes and outcomes

This report provides a summary of initiatives undertaken in each department. More detailed reports, including an analysis of student evaluations, are in the Appendix.

Chemistry and Natural Sciences

The Chemistry Department, together with Natural Sciences, based its transition programme on the 'Faculty 101' model from the University of Melbourne. This includes a series of academic staff-led workshops followed by meetings with second and third year student mentors. The aims of the programme were to give students the opportunity to:

1. Meet other first year students
2. Establish links with later year student mentors
3. Find out what is expected of students and what they can expect from the department
4. Develop new skills for successful, university-level study

A series of four workshops were scheduled at various points throughout the first term, following on from a range of activities during induction week. Students were introduced to the Transition Programme during induction week, both by the Chemistry Department staff who were giving other sessions, and by the Transition

Offier in a short presentation. The workshops covered the following topics, based on needs identified by first year teaching staff:

- 12 October *Studying at University – taking notes in lectures*: Dr Andrea Sella
 Getting the most out of the Transition Programme: Kathryn Boin
- 26 October *Collaboration, Collusion and Plagiarism*: Dr Derek Tocher
 Chemistry pop quiz
- 23 November *Developing Laboratory and Report Writing Skills*: Dr Wendy Brown &
 Dr Mike Porter
 Thinking about Scientific Careers: Mr Dave Carter, UCL Careers
 Service
- 7 December *Preparing for your first University Exam*: Dr Mark Wilson

Students were assigned to one of ten Chemistry groups or two Natural Sciences groups, with one mentor for each group. (See below under ‘Transition Mentors’ for more information about training and remuneration.) On the Wednesday afternoon following each workshop, students met with mentors to discuss the workshop content and anything else they were having difficulties with. Groups were also free to use this as social time if they preferred, as the mentor groups were equally designed for academic and social benefit. Groups were given a small activity or suggested discussion topics based on each week’s workshop, to use as a starting point.

In general, workshops and mentor groups had varying success with attendance, but those students who went to meetings seem interested and engaged, asked a lot of questions of mentors, participated actively and seemed to be gaining some benefit. A core group of committed students attended all workshops and mentor meetings while others came in and out. Mentors tried to stay in touch with members of their groups who have not attended meetings to determine the reasons. Those who respond say that they are involved in other activities on a Wednesday afternoon. Students who are taking Biology (particularly Natural Science and Medicinal Chemistry students) have a compulsory laboratory class on Wednesday afternoons. When it is considered that only about 55 of the total first year Chemistry cohort are available on Wednesday afternoons, due to the clash with Biology laboratories, an overall workshop attendance of 50% and above is an excellent result.

Student feedback on the Transition Programme was positive, with most respondents to the survey agreeing that they would recommend the programme to future first year students. A full report of the results from student evaluations is at Appendix A.

Comments from students included:

It gives a feel for what is expected of you and you meet someone who has gone through it before and you get useful inside tips.

Allows 1st year students to find out how the Chem department operates and what you are supposed to do.

It is helpful and inspiring.

Future developments

Chemistry

The Chemistry Department plans to run the Transition Programme again at the beginning of the 2006/7 academic year, with some changes including beginning the workshops and having students meet their mentors earlier in the term. There may be some revision of workshop topics and an investigation of whether it is possible to hold the events at a time other than Wednesday afternoons, although this will be difficult. The department will also follow up student progress at the end of the 2005/6 academic year to determine whether the transition programme has had any noticeable effects, although caution should be exercised in making direct links as there are a number of factors influencing student progress and retention.

Developing and running the programme this year has helped the department to reflect on the needs of first year undergraduates and the skills they need for success. Continuing to develop the Transition Programme as a visible initiative will demonstrate to students that the department cares for the welfare of its students and provides a range of support mechanisms. It will also help raise staff awareness of transition issues and how they can contribute to student success in first year.

Natural Sciences

While attaching the Natural Sciences students to the Chemistry transition programme was useful in this first year, in future the Natural Science programme will have its own transition workshops. Not many Natural Sciences students were able to attend

on Wednesday afternoons, due to their Biology lab classes, and those who did attend felt that, if they were not studying Chemistry, the topics were not always relevant. However, students were generally in favour of having the programme and said that they had gained something from each workshop. One of the mentors who took a Natural Sciences group also felt that the students appreciated having an opportunity to meet as a group, since this does not happen often in a programme where the students take many different subjects.

In 2006/7, it is most likely that there will be a separate Natural Sciences Transition Programme, linked to a core, first-year subject. Since this was the first year of the Natural Sciences programme, there was the disadvantage of not having any available second or third year mentors: next year, there will be second year students able to take on this role.

Institute of Archaeology

The first meeting with Ms Judy Medrington, Academic Administrator in the Institute of Archaeology, revealed that the Institute already offered an extensive range of support services to its first year students, which could be said to constitute a transition programme already. These include:

- a three-day experimental archaeology field trip for all students, which facilitates friendships
- a very active Student Society (the SAS) which participates in the field trip, then organises social and other functions throughout the year, with many members of the society performing an informal mentoring role for new students
- a Weekly Review and Monday Discussion group which include talks on study skills and student services at UCL, and an opportunity for students to reflect on their work, ask questions and provide feedback
- regular contact between students and their personal tutors, which includes completion of progress forms
- frequent contact between students and administrative staff in the Institute, who follow up students who are experiencing any difficulties.

The Institute decided that they were interested in exploring whether there were any other ways of supporting students and, after discussion with the president of the Student Society, decided that a formalised mentor programme should be put in place, to see whether students would benefit from having trained peer mentors to discuss any issues they may not be comfortable discussing with staff.

The mentor programme included eight second and third year students, who were trained by the Transition Project Officer. Mentors were assigned, in pairs, to one of the Monday Discussion groups. Mentors attended a Monday Discussion in week 4, to meet their group, explain their role, and hand out contact details. Scheduled meetings with mentors were not set up as it was felt students already have enough meetings through the Discussion and Review sessions. Mentors were instead to be available by mobile phone and email as needed. The Transition Project Officer also attended one of the Weekly Reviews, to explain mentoring to the first years.

Two meetings with Archaeology mentors revealed that the first years were making very little use of their mentors: only three of the eight had any contact with students,

despite calling informal 'surgery hours' in a cafe for students to meet with them if they would like to. The two students who have had the most contact with first years are also active members of the student society, so it is possible that students are more likely to contact the SAS than a mentor who is not as visible. The first year students were surveyed at the end of term to determine their reasons for not using the mentor scheme, and the results show that first year students already feel well supported through the other channels provided by the Institute and most of them did not feel that they needed mentors.

Despite so few students making use of the mentors, all but two of the respondents agreed that mentors should be available in the department, commenting:

Although I never felt the need to contact my mentor it was nice to know they were there just in case.

If I did actually have a problem then I would feel happy to go and ask the mentors' advice.

My mentors appeared very friendly upon first meeting them, I think it is a good idea for those people who wish to use them, if people need someone to go to, I'm sure they provide great support and advice.

A full report of results from the student questionnaire is at Appendix B.

The Institute of Archaeology pilot mentor programme has confirmed that the department already offered a comprehensive range of support for its first year students. It is a relatively small department with many opportunities for students to meet one another, make friends and get to know staff and later year students. The 'Primtech' field trip at the beginning of term is a long-established programme that almost guarantees that all students will develop friendship groups quickly, and the SAS is a very active society promoting a culture of inclusion and engagement with the Institute.

The Institute has affirmed its commitment to having student mentors available as an option for students should they need it, as it is a form of reassurance for students that there are a number of support systems in place. The mentors recruited this year have been reliable, committed, and a valuable source of feedback, both on the pilot project

itself and more generally on student experiences. The recommended changes for next year should help make the mentors more visible and encourage more students to make use of them.

Transition Mentors

The participation of later year students is important. The cooperation between staff and students in presenting aspects of the programme provides a more balanced view of university life, they are on the same level as the first year audience, they can inject more energy and variety and their observation of the programme offers us an honest and considered student appraisal. When employed as mentors, later year students become role models and offer first year students advice, a friendly ear and reassurance. The mentors themselves also benefit from the leadership and organisational skills they develop, and the chance to become more fully involved in their department. A recent article in *The Guardian* referred to research showing that students are less likely to consider leaving university in first year if they are involved in a peer mentoring scheme (28/11/05).

Mentors were a key aspect of both the departmental pilots. In order to make the role of mentor a professional one and to recognise their value to the programme, we created a Job Specification which was approved by Human Resources and evaluated for a casual pay rate. The mentors were graded at CRA2 and paid at point 15, £9.64 per hour, paid in a lump sum at the end of term.

Departments advertised the position to their second and third year students and asked them to complete an application form. Mentors were then selected by the Transition Project Officer and Departmental staff, and required to attend a training session before taking on the role, a follow-up meeting near half-term, and an evaluation meeting at the end of term. The training sessions were adapted to the particular programmes in each department (see appendix for a copy of the training outline) but shared common elements. All mentors were trained in the aims of the transition programme, responding to first year issues, referring students experiencing difficulties, and respecting the boundaries of mentoring.

Departmental staff and the Transition Officer have regularly kept in touch with mentors throughout the term to offer advice as needed.

Recommendations: Student mentors

- 1) The mentor position description has now been established and approved by Human Resources, and can be used as the basis for recruiting and selecting mentors. Each department should also write a description of the specific role they would like their mentors to undertake, depending on their individual programme.
- 2) The process of registering each mentor as an employee, issuing contracts and then paying them in a similar way to full time or continuing staff seems very paperwork-heavy for what is essentially only 15 hours or less of work across the term. It is recommend that it be investigated if there are other, simpler ways of registering and paying mentors.

Discussion: Student attendance, and the timing of transition workshops on Wednesday afternoons

Departments that offer the Chemistry and Natural Science style of transition programme will need to find the best time to schedule the workshops and mentor meetings. The choice to run workshops and mentor meetings on Wednesday afternoons was a difficult one, as we were reluctant to use the time when students may wish to be involved in clubs, sports or other activities. However, it was chosen because that time offers the best chance for having first, second and third year students available at one time and since the transition programme is not compulsory, students are free to get involved in other activities. In a way, it offers an alterative form of social gathering for students who are not interested in sports or clubs.

The problem of students taking cross-department courses which have Wednesday afternoon classes (despite this being strongly recommended by the Vice-Provost as a free afternoon) may continue to pose difficulties and demand more cooperation between departments teaching first year students.

Ultimately, if departments wish to run this style programme, they will need to find a time that works for their students, or change the way in which the programme is delivered. Suggestions discussed so far include:

- making the transition programme a compulsory, non-credit subject
- incorporating the material from the workshops into a core first year subject

The place of mentors, as a valuable element of the programme, would also need to be considered in such plans. E-mentoring may offer one solution, although personal contact is preferable.

Departments that have invested resources in developing a transition programme would naturally like to see the majority of first year students taking advantage of it, therefore the numbers attending the Chemistry programme in 2005 may seem disappointing. However, it should be remembered that transition initiatives can take some time to become embedded in the culture of the department and the university: five years is the accepted norm for the full establishment of a programme. An example to note and perhaps learn from is the 'Science 101' programme at the University of Melbourne – on which the UCL Chemistry programme was modelled. Science 101 has run each year since it was first piloted in 2000. Attendance records were taken from 2002 and have risen from 59% of first years in 2002, to 79% in 2005. Reasons for this include:

- Science 101 is placed automatically in every student's personal timetable
- the programme is promoted at every point of contact with both prospective and commencing students, so it is part of the process of becoming a first year student: they simply expect to attend
- most first year teaching staff are involved in the planning and delivery
- the department now has years' worth of positive student feedback and progress data that they can use in encouraging attendance
- the programme is subject to a continuous process of evaluation and improvement in response to student feedback, so it remains current and useful to students.

Lack of space on campus is also a serious issue, as mentor meetings and workshops all need suitable spaces to run and departments may need to consider ways to get around this problem. The possibility of **e-mentoring** could be investigated: although face-to-face interaction is preferable, space limitations may lead to online interaction as a viable alternative.

Human Communication Sciences mentor scheme

On request, the Transition Project Officer also gave some advice to the department of Human Communication Science. For a number of years they have been running a mentor programme where all third year students are given a first year mentee. The department felt that the students needed more information about how to make the most of the scheme. The Transition Project Officer provided the department with information for mentors and first year students about the benefits of mentoring and a mentor role description, then gave a short presentation on these topics to the first year students and their third year mentors at a session early in the term.

The Future of the Transition Programme

At the beginning of the pilot, the Transition Project Officer gave a presentation for staff which included information about the work done in Transition at the University of Melbourne: in particular, the elements of the Programme that have made it successful. This report now makes use those keys to success as relevant to UCL to offer recommendations about how the Programme can succeed here. Following is a discussion of these key elements including recommendations for taking them forward. A summary of the recommendations made throughout the report is also included.

Commitment over time and clear objectives

Transition Programmes – as with all new university projects – rarely become established in just one year. It can take five years before they evolve into being a part of the department and university culture to the extent that students and staff understand the benefits and expect to participate. If pilot programmes are not immediately successful, departments and the university should not lose heart: the programmes need to be evaluated, altered and tried again.

UCL and its departments also need to maintain clear objectives for the transition programmes. Retention of students from first to second year is usually the ultimate aim, but care must be taken in making this the sole objective. A large range of factors – many of which are out of the control of the department or UCL – contribute to a student's decision to persist or withdraw from studies. Departments should focus on aiming to create a supportive first year experience, with opportunities for students to make friends, understand what is expected of them, know where to find help and information, and develop the skills necessary for university-level study. Programmes should also aim to be inclusive of a range of student backgrounds so that all students feel they are welcome at UCL.

Flexibility to respond directly to the needs of individual departments.

The programme should not be imposed uniformly across UCL as a 'one-size-fits-all' solution: at the very least, it would be almost impossible for a single Transition Project Officer to work with over 60 departments in the way that the Project Officer have with Chemistry, Natural Sciences and Archaeology. Transition Programmes are more successful when tailored to specific student groups. These models are just two

of the possible ways to approach transition and any future Project Officer will have other experience and ideas, and work to adapt these models or develop entirely new ones according to department preferences.

Departments that currently have excellent student retention and feedback and demonstrate a good range of existing first year support strategies already have transition well taken care of, and there is little point imposing further programmes. Instead the Transition Programme, and the services of the Project Officer, should be available as a resource to those departments that want or need to introduce new initiatives or develop existing ones. To promote Transition across UCL and raise awareness of the term among staff and students, departments could be encouraged to 'rebadge' their induction and other existing first year support systems as 'Transition Programmes'. Departments doing well will also benefit from close monitoring to determine any changes in patterns of enrolment, retention and progression.

The Transition Audit gathered a lot of useful information about what departments are already doing and what they see as key student issues. Time did not permit a follow up of departments that did not respond to the Audit: this is a worthwhile activity for the future Project Officer to pursue in order to complete the picture.

It is worth considering coordination between similar departments to join in the running of transition: for example, science-based departments could run a joint programme of workshops and then students join mentor groups based on their department. This model works successfully at the University of Melbourne where, for example, the Faculty of Science offers a series of workshops to all of its 900 first year students, who may then join small groups in Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics and so on. Such an approach could save time and resources and give participating students the sense of being involved in a larger-scale and important programme. This would require departments' willingness to cooperate to ensure the workload is fairly distributed, and good coordination from the Transition Project Officer. Several staff from departments in the Faculty of Life Sciences attended the meeting of departments on December 9, and expressed interest in exploring the possibility of running such a joint programme in future.

Evaluation

Transition Programmes should be evaluated each year and the results used to improve them in following years. The University of Melbourne's 'Faculty 101 Resource Kit' includes a section on evaluation and a number of different ways to gather information about the success of programmes. (Two copies are available in the WP office.)

The programme's academic standing, profile and leadership.

Although the Transition Programme is situated in the Department of Educational Liaison and the Widening Participation Unit, care needs to be taken to ensure that it is not seen as of benefit only to non-traditional or international students. Departments and their students need to see it as having academic benefits for all students regardless of background. One of the greatest strengths of the University of Melbourne Transition Programme is the weight of academic authority behind it. From the beginning, key figures such as Deans and senior academic staff, the President of the Academic Board and Deputy Vice-Chancellors have 'championed' the programme by regularly seeking information about its progress, promoting it at committees, attending events and being members of the Programme's advisory and working committees. This process has begun at UCL with the membership of the Transition Programme Management Board and it is hoped that the members will continue to serve on the Board next year in an active capacity. For example, Mr Bob Allan, Senior Tutor invited the Project Officer to attend a meeting of the Arts and Humanities Faculty Teaching Committee to encourage departments to take part.

Transition at Melbourne also owes much to its close relationship with Centre for the Study of Higher Education researchers. The development of a similar relationship with UCL's Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning could be helpful.

Staff development

For transition to become widely accepted at UCL, there needs to be a high level of staff awareness and understanding of the student experience and best transition practice. Should the development of the Transition Programme go forward, some attention should be turned to staff information and possibly training. Initiatives that have had success at the University of Melbourne and other institutions include:

- staff page on the Transition website, including resources, research papers and information about developments in the programme

- training for new teaching staff on transition issues, small group teaching and dealing with students at risk (eg personal tutors, subject tutors, residence hall wardens, student union representatives)
- events for staff (eg forum, conference) to learn more about transition and share ideas

Work with other stakeholders, especially schools and parents

The Transition Project Officer has been involved in two school events this year:

- a presentation at the UCL Schools & Colleges conference in June
- a presentation at Haverstock School's UCAS day.

There is scope for the Transition Programme to have more interaction with schools, particularly in speaking to students about what to expect of university life and how to prepare themselves for the transition. Involvement with schools acknowledges that transition is a process which begins before the first day of university, and ensures that the Project Officer knows more about the educational background of first year students. There will be times of the year when transition work at UCL itself is relatively quiet, so these times could be used to create further links with schools, in conjunction with Widening Participation and Schools Liaison activities and possibly with the City and Islington College.

This work could also expand to include sessions for parents of prospective students, sessions at open days, or information in publications or the website. Although UCL's primary relationship is with the students themselves, we cannot underestimate the influence of parents on a student's decision to go to university and on their progress. Communication with parents about what to expect during the transition period, and how their role in the young person's life will change, can assist the transition process by making them more aware of the relationship between students and the university. Particularly at a time when fees are increasing and parents may be paying more, they may also demand more of the institution. Providing some transition information can help manage such demands. Oxford University, for example, produces a 'Parents and Carers' Guide to Oxford University'; and the University of Melbourne Transition website includes a section for Schools and Parents.

Research and engagement with UK/International developments

The Transition Officer should keep up to date with research developments in the UK and internationally. Attendance at the annual International Conference on the First

Year Experience is an excellent way to meet colleagues from many different countries and learn new ideas. There are also a number of conferences held in the UK that are of relevance. Undertaking occasional research about the student experience at UCL will also ensure that transition projects are relevant and respond to students' current needs.

Programme costings for department programmes: Funds available

Using the Department of Chemistry as an example, the cost of paying 12 mentors to work for about 15 hours over the term, and contributing to two first year student social events, came to approximately £2000. This can be used as a guide of costs per department, depending on the size of the first year population, style of programme chosen, and number of mentors recruited.

Summary of Recommendations

UCL-Wide

Raising awareness of services and sources of information

The development of the Transition website and the 'Quick Guide' (see below) as easy, practical and central sources of information available beyond Induction could go some way towards achieving greater awareness. Transition Programmes should also be designed to ensure students are informed about the support available to them, by delivering the information over time.

Transition Website

1) Location/accessibility of the site

The site used to be easily accessible from the Current Students homepage as a left-hand-side menu item. The recent redesign of the current student website means it is now listed as the last item under 'Related Matters' on the 'Joining UCL' site. Since this website is intended to assist students throughout their first year, and not just at the point of joining, it will need a more prominent and obvious position if it is to be found by current students.

Departments should also be encouraged to create a First Year section on their student websites and link to the Transition site.

2) Future development of the website

There is plenty of scope for future development of the site. Possible extras include more information on the practicalities of living in London, information for UCL staff, and a section for schools.

Marcus Duran has also been working on an e-mentoring project with the School of Medicine this year and there is a possibility that this could be further explored as a function on the Transition site, or with departments.

Quick Guide

The Quick Guide should continue to be updated and printed each academic year, and distributed earlier: for example with confirmation of offers or at registration and enrolment. Should UCL decide to provide copies for every student, a decision will need to be made about how this is funded, since Transition funds should only be used for commencing students, not the entire student body.

UCL-wide, central, study skills support

UCL should canvass departments further, to determine the need for more, central study skills support and then investigate ways of providing this for students on a group and individual basis.

In the interim, services such as those provided by CALT, the Language Centre and The Literary Fund Fellow should be more accessible and advertised to students more widely.

Management Board and networks

Over time, as more departments take on transition programmes, it may be necessary either to

- a) expand the membership of the Board to include representatives from the participating departments, or
- b) to create a working group of departmental representatives.

It is very useful for departments to meet to share ideas rather than operating in isolation, and the creation of a working group will help form a core group of UCL staff

with experience and knowledge of transition. Option (a) is particularly suggested so that the advisory and practical working functions are not separated, and to avoid the creation of too many committees. This would mean that departments, who are investing the most time and energy in transition, have a direct stake in the management and future direction of the programme.

First Year Student Transition Survey

The survey does not need to be administered every year: perhaps again in three years' time to determine if there are any changes. An interesting follow-up would be to survey students about their experiences at the completion of first year.

Department projects

Sharing best practice and promotion of Transition

While not actually known as 'Transition Programmes', the additional department initiatives offered after the induction period could be called so. They constitute good transition practice in that they offer targeted support to help first year students adjust to the academic and other demands of university-level study. They could be used as models for departments wishing to improve their first year programmes. To promote Transition across UCL and raise awareness of the term among staff and students, departments could be encouraged to 'rebadge' their induction and other existing first year support systems as 'Transition Programmes'.

Selection of departments for participation in projects

The process of selecting departments, inviting them and then waiting for their answer proved slow, frustrating and less than satisfactory. Departments need time to consider their involvement and the motivation for taking on such a programme needs to come from within the department, rather than imposed from outside. In future, it would be more productive to issue a more general invitation to find out which departments have the greatest need for a transition programme and an interest in participating. (See *Transition Audit* for a list of departments that have expressed interest.)

Student mentors

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