Report on Transition Programme 2005 Pilot

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December 2005

Contents
Executive Summary ................................................................................................................. 2
Background ................................................................................................................................. 4
  The introduction of a Transition Programme at UCL ......................................................... 4
  First Year Support at UCL: Results of the Transition Audit ........................................... 5
Central initiatives ....................................................................................................................... 11
  Transition Programme Management Board ................................................................. 11
  Participation in UCL meetings and events ........................................................................ 12
  Other consultation ............................................................................................................... 12
  Transition website ............................................................................................................... 13
  First Year @ UCL: A Quick Guide ..................................................................................... 14
  First Year Student Transition Survey ................................................................................ 15
Department initiatives ............................................................................................................ 17
  A) Selection of departments for transition pilot ........................................................... 17
  B) Programmes and outcomes ......................................................................................... 18
    Chemistry and Natural Sciences .................................................................................... 18
    Institute of Archaeology ................................................................................................. 22
    Transition Mentors ......................................................................................................... 24
The Future of the Transition Programme .............................................................................. 28
Summary of Recommendations ............................................................................................. 32
UCL-Wide ............................................................................................................................... 32
Department projects ............................................................................................................... 34

Appendix:

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

Unfortunately the invitation to take part in the pilot was not accepted by as many departments as had first been 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 and 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, although keen to take part, had trouble identifying who would take on the role of coordinating the pilot in the department, and in the end was unable to take part in the pilot. They have, however, expressed interest in being involved in 2006/7, because the curriculum has been redesigned.

- **History**: was approached because the department has a good track-record of Widening Participation activities and it was felt that a transition programme would follow on well from these. However, the Department decided that they would not take part this year due to other existing commitments.
  
  - **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, enthusiastically 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
Time constraints meant that the process of selecting departments for the pilot programme proved less than satisfactory, since departments need time to consider their involvement. 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 Officer 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 alternative 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

Time constraints meant that the process of selecting departments for the pilot programme proved less than satisfactory, since departments need time to consider their involvement. 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**

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.

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**Student attendance and the timing of transition workshops on Wednesday afternoons**

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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 so that it is timetabled
- 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.

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Department of Chemistry
with Natural Sciences

Report on Transition Programme Pilot 2005

The Chemistry Department developed a transition programme to take place throughout Term 1. Natural Sciences students, the first cohort on this new cross-department programme, were also invited to take part. The transition programme included 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 and by the Transition Project Officer 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 and Dr Dewi Lewis
          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 mentor groups or two Natural
Sciences groups, with one mentor for each group. 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 designed equally 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, groups have 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 had
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.

To cope with small attendance, mentor groups joined together and the mentors
worked proactively to encourage their members to attend. Just over half (58) of the
first year cohort attended the first workshop, with 45 students attending the first
mentor meeting. Attendance at the second workshop dropped to 26, although 31
students then went to their mentor group. The third workshop saw an increase to 41
students, probably due to the topic: Developing Laboratory and Report Writing Skills,
timed to coincide with students having to do their first report, and 34 students
attended the final workshop on preparing for exams. 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.
Staff and student mentors involved in the scheme

Department of Chemistry Staff
Dr Derek Tocher, Departmental Tutor: Coordinator of Transition Programme

Workshop presenters:
Dr Andrea Sella
Dr Dewi Lewis
Dr Wendy Brown
Dr Mike Porter
Dr Mark Wilson

Rosie Coates, Undergraduate Administrator

Natural Sciences Staff
Dr Daren Caruana
Dr Raman Prinja

Other UCL staff
Dave Carter, UCL Careers Service

Mentors
Valerio Amoretti
Elise Colledge
Jennifer Donaldson
Elinor Dunn
Adam Ellwood (Natural Sciences group)
Dina Hirmiz (Natural Sciences group)
Melissa Homewood
Gurwinder (Sunny) Sidhu
Andrew Smith
Sasja Steenvoorde
Laura Thompson
Katherine Woodhead
Student Feedback

Workshops
The two most highly rated workshops were ‘Developing Laboratory and Report Writing Skills’ and ‘Preparing For Your First University Exam’, both with an average rating of 4.1, on a scale of 1 (not useful) to 5 (very useful). The ‘Introduction to University Study’, during Induction week, rated 3.7, while its follow up was rated slightly lower at 3. The talk on ‘Scientific Careers’ was awarded an average rating of 3.5 by students who had attended, and ‘Collaboration, Collusion and Plagiarism’ received an average rating of 2.9. The popularity of each workshop is most likely due to how immediately relevant students view them. Laboratory reports and examinations, as assessment tasks, have a direct influence on students’ success and they are more likely to be anxious about having skills in these areas. Mentors also commented that they found these workshops the most interesting and practical, and would have liked to attend such sessions in their first year.

Students’ most common suggestion for improving the workshops was to hold them at a time other than on Wednesday afternoon. Timetabling was a key issue this year and will continue to be next year. A couple of students also commented that the workshops seemed to be timed a week or so later than they actually needed them – for example, the report writing workshop was held after they handed in their first report assignment. This was deliberately scheduled in such a way because we felt that students may not think they needed information about writing reports until after they had attempted the task and then received a marked one back, although this is a point to consider for next year.

Mentor groups
Students who did not attend any mentor meetings said that this was due to unsuitable timetabling of meetings, or a feeling that they did not need a mentor. Similarly, students who attended initial meetings, then stopped going, did so because the time no longer suited them, they no longer needed a mentor or they discovered the meetings were not compulsory. It is positive to see that no students said that they did not attend meetings because they did not get along with their mentor or group.

Students who attended mentor group meetings found that the most beneficial part about attending was having the opportunity to discuss first year in general (22 responses), followed by having a later year student to talk to (19):
'Discussing things with someone who’s been there done that and made the same mistakes'

Fewer students (9) found that the mentor groups helped them to get to know other first year students, most likely because attendance at the groups was sporadic. Only 6 students felt that one of the benefits of attending mentor groups was to be able to discuss the transition workshops. Mentors agreed that even when provided with an activity to follow on from the workshops, students seemed more interested in discussing general aspects of university.

The suggestions that first year students offered to improve the mentor groups were mixed, with some saying they wanted the meetings to be ‘more informal’ while others felt they should have ‘more structure’. Again, there was mention of Wednesday afternoons not being the best time.

**General programme feedback**

When asked what they hoped to gain by attending the Transition Programme, 74% said that they wanted to develop new skills for university-level study, and 65% wanted to find out what was expected of them and what they could expect from the department. Less than a third said that they attended to meet other first years or to establish links with mentors.

Students were asked to rate on a scale of 1 (‘not at all’) to 5 (‘to a great extent’) whether they felt they had gained these things. The biggest gain was in learning about expectations, with an average score of 3.4, closely followed by developing new skills with a score of 3.3. Since these were the two areas in which students wished most to gain something, these responses are very positive.

Most respondents (30) said that they would recommend the Transition Programme to future first year students, with comments including:

*There [are] important pieces of information. Some people may feel certain points are more important than others. But in general—a good structure, helpful and informative.*

*Because 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 students to meet other first year students and gives a first base of contact with a present student.

It is very useful to know what to do so you don’t make mistakes early on.

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

It is helpful and inspiring.

My mentor was really good and realistic… answered all questions that we asked.

The few who would not recommend the programme said so because of the Wednesday timing and because they felt the material was ‘nothing new’ to them:

Not really because it occurs on a Wednesday afternoon when students are involved in extra curricular activities, which is a break from your course.

The level of information was not very high and it was mainly easy, self-explanatory things that were told such as ‘get to exams on time’.

Other first year support
The survey also asked students if they would have liked any further support in first year. Suggestions ranged from academic to social support and included:

For some of the transition events to happen earlier ie how to write a lab report, taking notes.

More getting to know people on the course who you go to the same lectures etc as.

More social events to bring everyone together and allow everyone to expand out of their own social ‘comfortable’ zones.

Maybe more or longer workshops to help with the questions and to gain greater understanding.
One student said that they didn’t feel the need for extra support because the transition programme fulfilled this:

*Everything was achieved during the transition and mentor meeting – everything was good.*

**Mentor feedback**

Mentors provided excellent feedback on the programme. While attendance was the most difficult issue, the mentors persisted in contacting their students to try and arrange more suitable times, and allowing groups to join together made it easier to keep groups going.

The mentors suggested that trying to find a time other than Wednesday afternoons would be useful, and they would like to somehow have it impressed upon students that it is important to let their mentor know if they are coming to meetings or not. There was some understandable frustration from mentors who waited for students to turn up without knowing whether to expect them. Mentors would also like more detailed information about first year courses, so that they know more about changes to subjects, requirements and deadlines. In general, mentors felt adequately trained and supported in their role and while they were disappointed about attendance at times, were pleased that they had been able to assist those students who went to meetings. Many mentors expressed a wish that they had been offered a similar programme in first year.

**Recommendations for 2006/7**

- Mentors to have training and meet their students earlier in the term. The department will need to find a suitable time to recruit and train mentors that will fit in with the terms.
- Mentors suggested that perhaps the message about plagiarism is ‘hammered home’ a little too heavily and in too many places during first year, and does not warrant a whole workshop on its own. They also suspect that the students who are most likely to plagiarise are least likely to attend a voluntary programme. One suggestion is to include the topic with another workshop,
perhaps on study skills and referencing, or to have a workshop with a title like ‘Common mistakes made by first year students – and how to avoid them’.

- A workshop on time management could be useful as many first years said to their mentors that they were finding this difficult.
- Many of the mentors who will still be students in 2006/7 said that they would be happy to act as mentors again, and their experiences will be valuable in helping to train future mentors. Some also said that they would be willing to be involved in the training of mentors in other UCL departments that decide to start mentor/transition programmes.

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.

Summary

The Chemistry Transition Programme has been a success from the perspective of positive student and mentor feedback, and healthy workshop attendance despite difficulties with timetabling. The staff involved gave excellent, practical presentations, particularly those which focused on report writing and examinations. While students may have indicated that they think much of the content was ‘self-explanatory’ or ‘common sense’, it is still the case that such content is not obvious to all students, and their knowledge of items such as how to write a report or study for exams
depends on how well their previous study has prepared them for university level. Since the Chemistry first year cohort is a very diverse one, with a range of backgrounds and A-level results, this level of preparation, and therefore knowledge about the basics, cannot be assumed. The Transition Programme enabled Chemistry staff to clearly explain expectations and make students more aware of the study skills they need to succeed, therefore creating a more solid foundation.

The Department will check student progress after the January exam and at the end of the first year to see if there has been any change in retention. Care should be taken in making direct links between success, retention and attendance at the Transition Programme, as there were a number of reasons why students did not attend transition events. This is the first year of the Transition Programme and it can take years for such an initiative to be firmly embedded in the department and have a major influence, in addition to there being many factors that influence attrition, many of which are beyond the University’s or Department’s control. 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.

Kathryn Boin
Transition Programme Project Officer
Department of Educational Liaison
December 2005

Attachments:

1) Outline of Chemistry Transition Programme, including department-specific mentor job description, summary of mentor commitments and mentor application form
2) Information for mentors, including application form
3) Mentor handbook
4) Mentor training session outline
5) Student attendance at workshops and mentor meetings
6) Student evaluation form
7) Complete set of raw results and comments from student evaluations
Institute of Archaeology

Report on Transition Pilot 2005: Mentor Programme

The Institute of Archaeology was selected by the Transition Programme Management Board as one of the departments to participate in a pilot in 2005. The first meeting with Ms Judy Medrington, Academic Administrator in the Institute, revealed that Archaeology 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
- 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 and paid by the Transition Programme. These students were paired and each pair assigned 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 were already attending 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.

A mid-term meeting and then an end-of-term review with Archaeology mentors revealed that the first years made very little use of their mentors: only three of the eight had any contact with students, despite most of them calling informal ‘surgery hours’ in a cafe for students to meet with them if they would like to.

**Staff and student mentors involved in the scheme**

**Institute Staff**
Judy Medrington, Academic Administrator
Dr Norah Moloney, First Year Tutor
Dr Louise Martin, Lecturer

**Society of Archaeological Students**
David Honess, President

**Mentors**
Nick Carter
Annalisa Christie
Maria Elevant
Stephen McLeod
Tina Paphitis
Holly Powis
Georgia Sadler
Paul Wordsworth
Student Feedback

First year students were surveyed in the last week of term, to try and determine why students did not contact mentors and whether they felt the Institute should still offer mentors. Of the 43 who completed the survey, only five contacted their mentor during the term, and all of these five said that the advice the mentor offered was helpful:

*Georgia was extremely nice and helpful – more of a friend than a mentor. She is very good at being a mentor.*

Mentors reported that the questions asked by these students ranged from quite simple information, such as library opening hours, to more personal relationship issues and general advice about life in London. 11 students said that they felt mentors had offered good advice, which must be a reference to the time when they met the mentors in the Monday Discussion group.

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

*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.*

The most common reason for not contacting a mentor was simply that they did not feel the need or that they found support elsewhere. Nobody said that they did not contact them due to inaccessibility of the mentors themselves.

Due to time constraints with selecting and training mentors at the beginning of term, mentors did not actually meet their groups until Week 4 of term. A number of student
comments indicated that earlier, more frequent contact with the mentors may encourage students to approach them:

_We only met ours once and I can’t really remember who they were, and I’m not sure if I would necessarily feel comfortable in going to them for advice after only meeting them briefly once._

_Have them available at the beginning of term to help new students adjust._

25 students agreed that meeting mentors earlier would be beneficial, which the mentors confirmed would be a good idea. While some first years thought that having scheduled mentor meetings might encourage students to use their mentor, in general neither mentors nor the first years indicated that the informal, ‘as needed’ nature of the programme should change. With the range of support already offered, particularly the existing number of regular meetings – that is, the Monday Discussions and Weekly Review – students have many opportunities to meet one another, reflect and ask questions. To ensure that mentors are more familiar to the first years in future, it has been suggested that they play an active role in the Discussion groups for the first three weeks of term.

The survey also asked students who they are mostly likely to ask for support or information if having difficulties. Most (84%) would ask family and friends and about half would approach their personal tutor or year tutor. We also asked students whether there was any further support they would have liked to help them settle in to UCL, but very few had any suggestions. Two asked for more information about work placements, there was a single comment about needing more advice about progressing from A-level to university and another asked for more financial management help. In general, however, as one student put it, there is already ‘so much’ support that they do not see a need for more.

**Mentor feedback**

The feedback from mentors matched the student evaluation of the programme. Mentors felt that they would have liked to meet their student groups earlier, and perhaps have more frequent contact with the first year students, through Monday Discussions or social events, so that they can become more familiar to students. This is reflected in the fact that the two mentors who had the most contact with first years are also active members of the student society and therefore highly visible.
Despite this, all of the mentors said that they are happy to be available if needed, and none feel that their time was wasted being trained. In a way they are disappointed, but also pleased that perhaps this is a sign that students are feeling well enough supported in the department through other ways. The mentors said that they had found the training useful (even if they haven’t actually put it into action). Many of them have expressed interest in being mentors again next year.

Recommendations for 2006/7

Elements of the programme to maintain
- attach mentors to Discussion Groups and have two mentors per group
- mentors to be available as and when needed, rather than scheduled meetings
- a mix of second and third year, and SAS/non-SAS mentors

To change for 2006
- mentors to meet students earlier, possibly at a social function before Primtech, then meet formally in the week after Primtech. Mentors suggested that if they attend the first three Discussion Groups, they will become more familiar to their group and therefore students may be more likely to contact them. Mentors had attended the final Discussion Group for the term and students asked them a lot of questions about study, accommodation, planning for next year etc, so it would be beneficial for mentors to have a more active presence in Discussion Groups.
- Mentors would therefore need to be selected and trained in the summer term, so advertising will begin after the Easter break.
- It would also help to have one or two of this year’s mentors carry over to next year, to provide experience to new mentors.

Summary
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.

Kathryn Boin
Transition Programme Project Officer
Department of Educational Liaison
December 2005

Attachments:

1) Summary of support system for first year undergraduates in the Institute of Archaeology, by Judy Medrington, Academic Administrator
2) Outline of Archaeology Mentoring Programme, including department-specific mentor job description, summary of mentor commitments and mentor application form
3) Mentor handbook
4) Mentor training session outline
5) Student evaluation form
6) Complete set of results and comments for student evaluation of the mentor programme
First Year Undergraduate Transition Survey
2005/6

Contents

Executive Summary ............................................................................................................. 2
Background of respondents .................................................................................................. 4
Which aspects of university life do first year undergraduates most look forward to? ................................................................. 5
What are first year students most concerned about? ....................................................... 7
What challenges do first year students expect to face? .................................................. 10
Where to from here? ........................................................................................................... 12
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... 12
Appendix 1: Text of letter sent to first year students ....................................................... 13
Appendix 2: Survey ............................................................................................................ 15
Executive Summary

The Transition Programme has been introduced at UCL as 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 College, to address the academic, social and practical aspects of transition to university.

This UCL First Year Undergraduate Transition Survey was sent to students in August 2005, 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. A copy of the survey and the accompanying letter are attached in Appendix 1 and 2.

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. A selection of these comments are included after the discussion of each question.

Students are looking forward to…

The social opportunities that university offers, as well as embarking upon a new stage of their life as independent adults, were the most frequently mentioned among all groups of students, with the course itself coming in at third. International students were far more likely than UK students to say they were looking forward to starting their course.

Students are concerned about…

Social aspects are the most common cause for concern: first year students have high expectations of meeting new friends and becoming involved in campus life but they are worried that this may not happen as quickly or as easily as they would like. Academic issues such as workload and the difficulty of the course are also a major concern, with a number of students expressing doubt that they will be able effectively to manage their time or match the standard set by their peers. Financial matters, including the cost of living in London and their ability to manage their own money for the first time, concern over a quarter of the respondents.
Challenges expected

Many students anticipate academic challenges, including learning to manage study independently and without so much teacher input, coping with the level of difficulty and increased workload, and being taught in a different way from school. The next most frequently mentioned challenge was learning how to manage their daily lives without parents: they are looking forward to the freedom gained by moving out of home but are aware (and in many cases wary) of their new responsibilities. Being able to successfully balance study, budgets, social lives and the opportunities of living in London is a challenge most first year students will be negotiating during their first term at least.

Responses of particular groups

There were some expected differences in response from different student groups depending on whether they were from London, elsewhere in the UK, or abroad, and on their age and type of accommodation. Naturally, the particular concerns of mature age students were focussed on being older than their classmates, adjusting to studying after a break, and juggling family or work responsibilities with university. International students expressed concern about learning to live in a new culture and whether their language skills would be good enough. Interestingly, students originally from London seem more aware than non-Londoners of the academic challenges awaiting them, particularly the independent nature of study and self-motivation required. It is difficult to determine exactly why this is the case. It may simply be because even if they are moving out of home, they are not moving such a distance away from family as their peers from elsewhere in the UK, so are therefore less preoccupied by the challenges of moving.

Kathryn Boin
Transition Programme Project Officer
Department of Educational Liaison
October 2005

Note: Responses from particular departments/degree programmes

Due to the number of degree programmes, this report does not break down results by degree or department. If staff would like results from their department, please contact me on k.boin@ucl.ac.uk or phone 7679 0489 (internal extension 30489).
Report on First Year Student Transition Survey 2005/6

The First Year Student Transition Survey aimed to give a brief snapshot of the major concerns of first year students, as well as what they were looking forward to about university, and what they felt would be their greatest challenges.

Every first year undergraduate student with a firm and accepted offer from UCL – approximately 3,100 – was posted a copy of the First Year Survey at the end of August 2005. They were given the option of completing the survey on paper and returning it by post, or filling it out online. As encouragement to participate, all who completed the survey were entered in a prize draw to win an Apple iPod Nano or one of ten £25 book vouchers. 834 valid surveys were completed, representing 27% of the first year student body.

Background of respondents

Table 1: Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(of the UK students, 43% are from London)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17-20 years:</td>
<td>732</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-29 years:</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 years and over:</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accommodation</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UCL residences:</td>
<td>545</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With family:</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of London residences:</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private rented accommodation:</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own home, council flat or unknown:</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Broad programme of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BA</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEng</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSc</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSc (Econ)</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LLB</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MB BS</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEng</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSci</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>834</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a breakdown of number of respondents by specific programme name is available on request)
**Which aspects of university life do first year undergraduates most look forward to?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What are you most looking forward to about university?</th>
<th>% of students who mentioned this aspect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New start</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career development</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most students were particularly looking forward to the social aspects of university life; meeting new people and generally getting involved in ‘student life’. Many of them mentioned particular activities they had heard about, such as Fresher’s Week, sports, music and other societies. International students were less likely to mention social aspects: although this was the most common response, they did not name social life or activities as frequently as their UK colleagues. When they did mention socialising, they were more likely then UK students to say they were looking forward to meeting people of different cultures and backgrounds.

Almost half of all students were looking forward to the freedom of an independent lifestyle, away from parents and family. This was particularly marked for students from outside London who are more likely to be moving out of home. Interestingly international students, most of whom are making the biggest break from home, were half as likely to mention independence as being a major feature for them.

The third most common response was that students were looking forward to starting their courses: many have been wanting the opportunity to focus on one area of study that they love, rather than having to do a range of subjects at A-level. Many gap year and mature age students were looking forward to getting into study after a break. International students were far more likely than UK students to say that they were most looking forward to their course, perhaps being more focussed on the academic aspects due to the extra investment and commitment they are making by moving abroad to study.

London is a major attraction for many students who are looking forward to living and studying in the middle of a large city with a lot to do. Those from outside London are particularly keen to discover London. Many described particular activities that London offers, such as theatre and nightclubs, as being very attractive, while others are looking forward to the change from living in a small, rural area.

Many simply said that they were looking forward to a change and a chance for a fresh start. Some also mentioned that they really wanted to pursue a certain career and that the degree was their opportunity to move towards that end goal: this was particularly marked for students studying Medicine.
Student comments:

‘To able to start my own life. To be able to study just the subjects that I like i.e. not having to study the subjects that I don’t like. I am also looking forward to meet new people from all over the world, make new friends, start a network of connections.’

(International)

‘I am most looking forward to studying a course which really interests me, learning from the professors, and interacting with other students.’

(UK, London)

‘I am looking forward to joining many of the diverse range of clubs and societies and meeting many different people. I am also looking forward to the different aspects of student life such as independent living, and more freedom.’

(UK, London)

‘Meeting new people, joining new clubs and escaping from the tight claustrophobic clutches of my parents!’

(UK, London)

‘Living in a big, bustling city; experiencing another country’s culture; being in a large multi-ethnic university.’

(International)

‘Moving out of the small town in which I live and experiencing a new independence.’

(UK)

‘I am even looking forward to a new method of independent learning by reading different materials and forming my own opinions and expressing them through essay writing.’

(UK, London)

‘Getting a clear focus on my career and future, and finding out what I want to do with my life.’

(International)

‘I am greatly looking forward to the change in environment as I was previously in full-time employment and I know this will be a very different setting.’

(UK, London)

‘The independence! Being more in control of what and how I study, concentrating on a subject that I am so interested in, and getting a chance to stand on my own two feet and start doing things for myself.’

(UK)
What are first year students most concerned about?

Most respondents named more than one particular concern, with many listing a wide range of issues to do with academic, social and organisational matters.

**Table 2: Concerns**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What are your main concerns about starting university?</th>
<th>% of students who mentioned this aspect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic (see breakdown below)</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Management</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent lifestyle</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homesickness</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course choice</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mature-age related</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language/Culture</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Breakdown of academic concerns**

| General                                               | 26           | 27          | 23            | 30                      |
| Workload                                              | 14           | 20          | 11            | 9                       |
| Academic independence                                 | 4            | 7           | 3             | 2                       |

Perhaps because so many students have high hopes for their university social life, this is also their greatest concern: many are worried about making friends and fitting in. Some mentioned in particular that they were concerned about how they would fit in to a social culture which appears largely based on drinking alcohol, when they are not drinkers. Some mature age students said that they were worried about making friends when the majority of students are much younger than them. Those who will be living with their family rather than in halls were particularly concerned that they might find it difficult to make friends and get involved in campus activities.

International students were not as concerned about social aspects as UK students, expressing greater concern for academic matters, in particular whether they would be able to match the standard required and get good grades.

Academic concerns were mentioned frequently. Some made particular mention of being unsure whether they would be able to cope with the workload, with some already being intimidated by the amount of reading they had been given to do over the summer. Others had more general worries about issues such as whether they would find the course too difficult, getting good grades and studying for exams. Some expressed doubts about whether they would be ‘good enough’ in comparison with other students. Only 4% of students overall said that they were worried about adapting to the independence required of university study, however it was interesting to note that students from London were far more likely than either other UK or international students to mention this as a concern.
Finance – that is, learning to budget and having enough money to live on – is the next major concern for students and was more marked for those moving to London from elsewhere in the UK, but interestingly not so much for international students. Many express particular concern about the cost of living in London, and are worried that they will spend all of their student loan too early. Debt was also mentioned by many, although it was uncertain whether they meant getting into debt with credit card spending, or with having a student debt at the end of their degree.

Concerns related to life in London were quite common: these concerns included finding their way around, adjusting to living in such a large city in contrast to a smaller town, personal safety and using the transport system. Even some students who are originally from London and staying with their families are worried about aspects of the city: some are particularly concerned about commuting long distances and spending more time in central London than they have previously. Four students mentioned a worry about terrorism in London, and one Muslim international student raised a concern about being from such a background given the events of July 7.

Many have worries about accommodation: a few students had not yet found somewhere to live at the time of the survey, but most concerns were related to living in student residences. These related to a range of issues from lack of knowledge about the general standard of accommodation, getting along with people in their flat, having to share a bedroom, kitchen or bathroom with strangers.

Related to this was a general worry about having to be independent and do things they are accustomed to having their parents do. Cooking, shopping and cleaning were mentioned by many as tasks they would have to get used to doing for themselves, as well as budgeting and even waking themselves up in the morning.

Many discussed this in the context of balancing such necessities alongside their other time demands including study, socialising, sport, making time for family and having a part time job. Time management was a concern for 12.5% of students, with London students slightly more concerned – perhaps since some of them would still be living at home rather than a student residence and therefore having to factor in travel time.

Other students said they were worried about homesickness and missing family and friends from home. Some are concerned that they will not like their course or realise they have chosen the wrong one. Some were finding the administration involved with registering as a student quite daunting, while mature age students had concerns about returning to study after working full-time or juggling university with other responsibilities such as family.

One in ten international students expressed concern about adjusting to the culture of England and studying in English.

‘Starting from cooking, cleaning the house and washing my clothes to attending strenuous classes, completing assignments and studying for the exams. The biggest challenge in adjusting to university life will definitely be university life itself. The hardest part of this first year will be to find the point where one can balance work, fun and responsibilities, whether these are academic or simple necessities of life. And, of course, to be successful in all! Can it get any harder than that?’ (International)

‘the biggest challenge is to get used to living completely independent and virtually by myself (… being most afraid of the washing machine to be honest… )’ (International)
‘I worry about fitting in. When people mention student life they tend to always talk about binge drinking and when you are someone who doesn’t drink excessively it can be quite intimidating.’ (UK)

‘I’m most worried about starting university in such a huge city like London. I have never lived in a city and therefore have no idea how I will react to the rush of a city.’ (International)

‘Slightly concerned about the terrorism situation in London but not too much’ (UK, London)

‘Acceptance. I am a Muslim, a strong believer of peace and harmony. Recent incidents around the world have caused misunderstanding about and negative perceptions towards my faith. I worry that people not find any room in the hearts to accept me the way I am.’ (International)

‘Getting lost! Feeling small and un-important in the face of such masses! Not knowing what to do or where to go in the first few weeks, a new type of studying that I may not be used to and may not be aware that I have to engage in, moving from a very sheltered sort of lifestyle and education to a much more independent and intimidating one, at least at the beginning.’ (UK, London)

‘Making friends as I am a little older than everyone else and I have a child.’ (UK, London)

‘I am, of course, anxious that I won’t be as good as other people on my course and that the work load will be difficult to cope with.’ (UK, London)

‘Being overwhelmed by it all! I keep getting letters from different parts of the Uni: UCL itself, the French department, the German department, all telling me that I have to be somewhere on a certain day with certain things. To be honest, already finding it hard to keep track and I’m not even there yet!’ (UK)

‘Bridging the gap between 6th form and university.’ (UK)

‘Living in halls and sharing kitchen/bathroom with lots of people.’ (UK, London)

‘That it won’t live up to the expectations that I’ve laid down for it. And if it doesn’t if I can still enjoy myself despite that.’ (UK)

‘That I won’t enjoy it. That I won’t make good friends. That I’ll feel isolated and alone. That I won’t cope with living in a more independent manner. That I’ll feel out of place as a result of my background. That I won’t get on well with the public school people and the international students. That I’ll feel swamped by the size and concrete nature of being in the middle of a massive city. That I’ll find the work too hard or won’t enjoy it. That I won’t be able to manage my finances well. All those things that you never need to think about when you live with your parents. That people will be hostile/less friendly than I’m used to in the north. That I’ll miss opportunities. That I made the wrong decision and should have gone elsewhere.’ (UK)
What challenges do first year students expect to face?

The challenges students expected to face were in many respects similar to the concerns they have, but this question drew out further details about their expectations of university life. In these areas, many students commented that they were aware that these aspects would be a challenge, but one they were looking forward to rather than being concerned about.

### Table 3: Challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do you expect will be the biggest challenge in adjusting to university life?</th>
<th>% of students who mentioned this aspect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic – see breakdown below</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence (life)</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homesickness</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusting to study after gap year</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language/culture</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mature age</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Breakdown of academic challenges

| Academic independence | 14 | 19 | 9 | 14 |
| General | 10 | 11 | 8 | 15 |
| Learning/teaching style | 10 | 9 | 9 | 12 |
| Workload | 6 | 10 | 5 | 3 |

Students are most mindful of the academic challenges awaiting them, with 40% of all students mentioning a range of academic issues. Of these, independence in study was the most frequently mentioned, followed by more general challenges such as rising to the level of difficulty, completing assignments or getting high grades. Others expect they will have to adjust from the teaching and learning style they were accustomed to at school, to the new style of university teaching, with many mentioning lectures and tutorials in particular.

Interestingly, and in reflection of the concerns expressed by students from London, those still living at home were more likely than those moving into student residences to say that time management, independent study and the university teaching style would be a challenge. The difference in emphasis could be explained in a number of ways. Most likely, it is because moving out of home and gaining independence represents the most significant change in the lives of students living in halls, so they give more weight to such challenges over and above the academic aspects. For students staying with family, moving from school to university is the biggest life change.

24% of all students felt that the biggest challenges were associated with their new, independent lifestyle and having to look after themselves rather than relying on parents. As expected, international students and those living in university or private rented accommodation named this most frequently.
Learning to manage money, bank accounts and student loans was the next greatest challenge for all but international students. 17% of students also felt that living in London would present challenges, in particular the cost of living, and adjusting to life in a large and complex city. Students living in private rented accommodation mentioned London more frequently than others, probably because they will have to deal with more complex issues than those in university residences.

The challenge of meeting new people from different backgrounds and making friends is on many students’ minds, more so for those moving from outside London than for those already living here who will have established networks or will be more easily able to keep in touch with old friends.

17% of the survey respondents acknowledged that time management is a necessary skill, and feel it will be a challenge to learn to balance their study, social life and domestic responsibilities.

Adjusting to living in a hall of residence, surrounded by other students, and learning to share space with people other than family was felt to be a challenge by some, as well as getting over homesickness or being without their usual support network.

‘Learning to live in a new place. After 16 years of living in the same house in the same small town 258 miles north of London, adjusting to living independently in a massive and diverse city with total strangers will be an experience to say the least!’ (UK)

‘Managing in a very tight budget and not getting into too much debt.’ (UK)

‘Definitely organising myself. There will be no parents or teachers to push me at all - if I miss a class, or a deadline, its completely my fault. So keeping on top of things will be one of my major priorities.’ (UK, London)

‘Having taken a gap year, I think the biggest challenge will be getting myself back into the mind set for learning, writing essays, doing reading etc.’ (UK)

‘Adapting from the teaching style of A-Level studies to the University teaching style.’ (UK)

‘It would probably be the challenge of taking care of yourself without any help, organizing your study as well as your private life all alone. I think that having to coordinate daily chores, friends and a study routine (and hence to create a new lifestyle) will be the biggest challenge since I expect to ruin a few pairs of trousers in the laundry at a certain point...’ (International)

‘Managing to cope with the advanced academic level and keeping up with assignments.’ (UK, London)

‘Studying in English will be quite a challenge.’ (International)

‘Growing used to not being recognised around university because there are just so many people, that might be quite intimidating.’ (UK, London)

‘Being independent - I can’t wait to face the big bad world but I can just imagine that some nights I’ll want to come home to my Mum’s cooking and for someone else to do my washing! Also I think getting the work-play balance right could be tricky if I don’t
watch what I’m doing, and of course managing my own finances – I’m not used to handling as much money as my student loan will give me!’  (UK)

‘Moving away from home to a different city and country, there’s a whole different culture to adjust to.’  (International)

‘The whole London culture - liveliness, constant rush, the un-friendliness (to a certain extent), and the student culture - drinking, partying, etc.’  (International)

‘I think the biggest challenge will be adjusting to the attitudes of the tutors and lecturers towards us. In other words, learning to be pro-active instead of waiting for teachers to tell us what to do as they won’t be continuously nagging us.’  (UK)

‘The change from being an expert in my job to being a beginner in my studies.’  (UK, London)

‘I think the biggest challenge will be self motivation, not just in work but also in life. By this I mean motivating yourself to go out and meet new people, even though you may just want to hide away in your room, cooking for yourself, cleaning everything for yourself, grocery shopping, revising, basically everything that you may have had help with in the past. But I think this all will be a massive learning experience.’  (UK)

Where to from here?

Eight of the students who participated in the survey are now part of the ‘First Year Weblog’: once a month they are writing about their impressions of university life and discussing how real their concerns and expectations have turned out to be. The Weblog will be of particular interest to prospective students who wish to know more about what university life is like, and how students’ thoughts and feelings about their courses and other aspects develop over time. See http://www.ucl.ac.uk/transitions/blogs/index.shtml

This survey report is to be disseminated to those who work with prospective and commencing undergraduate students at UCL. Along with other, forthcoming reports about the transition pilot projects, it can help inform the way we interact with and support students while they are making choices about applying for university, preparing to join UCL, then experiencing their first few months of higher education.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Marcus Duran, Widening Participation Web Developer and to Bella Malins, Head of Admissions, for their assistance with the survey project.
Welcome to UCL

Congratulations on getting a place at UCL! We look forward to welcoming you for the start of the new academic year.

Want to WIN an iPod?
Or some book/CD/DVD vouchers?
It's easy: just be part of the

UCL First Year Student Survey

As you embark on your course, we know you will have many expectations, and maybe some concerns. Of course you're looking forward to starting university and to the many opportunities that lie ahead of you. Most students will also be feeling some uncertainty about what university will be like, and how well you will settle in.

This year, UCL has introduced a new Transition Programme to support you while you are ‘in transition’ to a new style of learning and a new way of life.

To make this relevant to you, we need your input! What are your thoughts about starting university? What are your hopes, your concerns and your expectations? How can we best assist you to settle in to university life? We've set up an online survey to gather your thoughts. Everyone who completes the survey on time will be entered in our prize draw.

Please see over the page how you can be part of the survey
Two ways to enter:

1 ONLINE

Go to the Transition website at [www.ucl.ac.uk/transitions/firstyearsurvey](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/transitions/firstyearsurvey), complete the form with your details, then complete and submit your response by **23 September 2005**.

OR

2 BY POST

Complete the enclosed form and return it by **23 September** to:

Transition Programme  
Widening Participation Unit  
Department of Educational Liaison  
Room 18, 1st floor, South Wing  
University College London  
Gower St  
London WC1E 6BT  
United Kingdom

*Your response must reach us by 23 September to be eligible for the prize draw.*  
You are still welcome to send us your response after this date but you will not be entered to win a prize.

We will use the most frequent responses to create a guide for new students: a guide that directly addresses YOUR concerns. Look out for us online at:

[www.ucl.ac.uk/transitions/](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/transitions/)

This website, linked to the **Joining UCL** site, will direct you to all the sources of information, help and fun on campus including links to departments, the UCL Union and more.

**UCL Student Discussion Forum**  
If you have more general questions about university and you would like to chat with other new students, as well as some later-year students, you can also go to the UCL Discussion Forum at [www.ucl.ac.uk/discussions/](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/discussions/) to chat about London life, accommodation, money matters and more – you might even be able to even link up with other students from your department.

*We look forward to hearing from you and wish you all the best at UCL!*

Kathryn Boin  
Project Officer, Transitions Programme
Appendix 2: Survey

UCL First Year Student Survey 2005

Thank you for completing the 2005 First Year Student Survey. Your responses will be very valuable in helping us plan the best information and support for new students.

You can also complete this survey online if you prefer: www.ucl.ac.uk/transitions/

Background information about you

1. What course are you beginning?

2. Are you a ☐ UK student or ☐ International student

3. For UK students: are you from ☐ London ☐ Elsewhere in the UK

4. What age will you be when you begin at UCL?
   ☐ 17-20 ☐ 21-24 ☐ 25-30 ☐ 30-40 ☐ 40+

5. What type of accommodation will you be living in?
   ☐ UCL student residence
   ☐ University of London student residence
   ☐ Private rented accommodation
   ☐ With family
   ☐ Other (please specify) ________________________________

6. Your contact details
   These details will only be used to enter you into the prize draw and contact you if you win a prize. All responses to this survey are confidential and personal information will not be used to identify your response in any way. Only prize winners will be notified of the result of the draw.

   Full name
   ________________________________

   Email
   ________________________________

   Telephone number
   ________________________________

   Address
   ________________________________
   ________________________________
   ________________________________
Your thoughts about starting university (please attach a sheet of paper if you need more room)

7. What are you most looking forward to about university?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

8. What are your main concerns about starting university?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

9. What do you expect will be the biggest challenge in adjusting to university life?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

First Year Web log 2005/6

We would like a group of students from a range of departments to contribute to a First Year Web log, which will mean emailing us a monthly update on how you are getting on with your first year. This will then help us provide real life stories for prospective students who wish to know more about what studying at UCL is like. If you are interested in finding out more about this project and think you might like to be involved, please indicate this below and ensure you have included your contact details above. We will then send you more information over the coming weeks.

☐ Yes, please send me more information about being involved in the first year Web Log.

Please return this survey by September 23 to: Transition Programme, Widening Participation Unit, Department of Educational Liaison, Room 18, 1st floor South Wing, University College London, Gower St, London WC1E 6BT, United Kingdom