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Transitions into higher education: Processes, outcomes and collaborations

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Abstract

Induction into university education is identified as crucial to the retention of an increasingly diverse student body. Research shows that ineffective induction into higher education can leave learners shocked, lost, lonely, disorientated and disaffected. This paper explores the issues revealed by a qualitative examination of a series of case studies of higher education (HE) induction programmes in UK universities. The case studies represent a cross-section of induction programmes offered by different disciplines. The analysis suggests that, in response to the increasingly diversified student body, institutions themselves can respond by, for example, adapting induction programmes, learning and teaching approaches or course management. Alternatively, students can be required to adapt to the learning environment that is new to them. However, these issues can more helpfully be considered a process of transition and universities can extend their induction support activities beyond the first week and into the first year. Further research should include the development of a benchmarking tool as a means of facilitating institutions in their development of processes and mechanisms to support learner transitions into and through the HE experience. Initial findings begin to suggest a number of areas of induction activity which could well be so benchmarked.

Introduction

This paper is premised on the realisation that an increasingly diverse student body is entering higher education (HE), a trend highlighted in the Dearing Report on Higher Education in the UK (1997). Clay and Frame (2005) suggest that this trend is in part the result of the internationalisation of higher

education, as reflected in the policies of successive governments and the mission of individual universities. The increased heterogeneity of the student population requires a greater recognition among teachers that their learners will have a range of aspirations for a personal journey of transformation, some undoubtedly related to the need for an enhanced work life. It is, therefore, essential that faculty understand the process of learner assimilation and adaptation into, through and beyond higher education. Among some stakeholders, increasing internationalisation has become a cause for concern associated with perceptions of a decline in standards in universities and assumptions that high quality education was traditionally possible because of historical investment locally in pre-university education. This concern is characterised by the construction of international students as others, and the development of discourses that provide a limited set of responses to such changes (Devos, 2003).

Research into the retention of students in higher education highlights the fact that support activities happen most often during the students' first year, which is often regarded as a make or break year (DfES, 1992; Johnston, 1997; Martinez, 1995; Moore, 1995). For example, Aston and Bekhradnia (2005) compared retention rates among students from the University of North London and London Guildhall University prior to their merger to form London Metropolitan University. They found no observable factors in either student body that explained the different drop-out rates between and within these universities. Both universities suffered from substantially high rates of non-completion in the first year of study. The University of North London had a higher non-completion rate, but there was no firm evidence which identified any factors that could account for this.

Roberts, Watkin, Oakey, and Fox (2003) divided new University of Salford students into doubters and non-doubters based on their response to a question about whether they had considered leaving the university. The authors found it difficult to identify clear distinguishing features between these two categories. However, they did discover a generally negative attitude to aspects of the student experience and argued that:

...students who are slower to adapt to the new environment will perceive the socialisation process as more problematic than those who adapt more quickly. If individuals are slower to respond to the changes they encounter during this process, it may be reasonable to assume that they may perceive all aspects of the new experience less favourably (Roberts et al., 2003, p. 7).

For students, the challenge of adapting to university life provides an important focus for research associated with ways of achieving student retention, that is, the development of our understanding of the process of inducting students into their university education, during the first week in its short form, during the first semester in its sustained form or indeed the whole first year in its extended form (Steltenpohl & Shipton, 1986; Zepke & Leach, 2005). Clearly, for some students, the decision to withdraw may well be appropriate. However, it is widely acknowledged that withdrawal can have significant and negative consequences and costs associated with it, such as impacting on employment prospects in later years, or a more personal and immediate impact, such as loss of confidence or self esteem (Johnston, 1997). Roberts et al. (2003) found that a high proportion of their 'doubters' were goal-oriented, instrumentally selecting their courses for the career prospects they held out. Consequently, they argued that employability skills should be embedded and transparent to students at an early stage in their programme, thus making their programmes of study more attractive.

As a means of developing our understanding of how to reduce student disengagement, this paper firstly reviews the literature in the field and then outlines the methodology utilised. This is followed by a report and a discussion of the findings from our case analysis of a cross-section of UK higher education institutions. The outcomes of our analysis are presented. Further research, we suggest, should include the development of a benchmarking tool as a means of facilitating institutions in their development of processes and mechanisms to support learner transitions into and through the higher education experience, and our initial findings begin to suggest a number of areas of induction activity which could well be so benchmarked.

Literature review

As Tight (2003) points out, the major focus of the induction literature in higher education is towards universities adjusting and adapting to the needs of international students. There appear to be two contrasting perspectives about who does the adapting. One focus is on staff and institutional adjustments as recommended, for example, in the work of Scott (1998). An alternative perspective suggests a recognition of the need for students to adjust (Bhabha, 1990). These two discourses have recently been noted by Zepke and Leach (2005), who identify one discourse as centering on what universities do to integrate students into the existing organisational culture. Whilst the other discourse is still emerging, it is one which recommends that higher education cultures be adapted to the needs of the diverse student body. Their work is based on a synthesis of the literature and, though the focus is on retention, the two discourses they identify are especially pertinent to issues of induction, in that it has helped us identify three distinct sub-discourses and questions associated with these:

- To what extent do institutions expect complete or partial integration, and to what extent are they adapting, if at all, to the increased diversity resulting from widening participation and overseas recruitment?
- Conversely, to what extent should new students be expected to transform themselves in order to integrate with the new culture of their host university?
- And, finally, are there particular areas of non-adaptation/non-integration on the part of both parties, that is, are there areas which are non-negotiable?

The decision not to have alcohol at freshers' parties which might be attended by Muslims is an example of adaptation on an institution's part. Conversely, students integrate if they accept their institution's plagiarism policy and act upon it. This dichotomous framing of institution and student illustrates the challenge which faces those responsible for induction and retention. However, as an example of complex changes which are affecting the higher education sector across the world, this dichotomous framing of the problem may limit possible responses.

Steltenpohl and Shipton (1986) argue that entry into higher education involves transitions related to self, to job and to family, and that these transitions may be both conscious and unconscious. In addition to the resultant shifts in identity, they argue, mature students in particular may lack confidence in their "ability to study and learn" (p. 638). Anxiety relating to learning, though, may be equally a feature of younger students coming to university straight from school, though the sources of this anxiety may differ. For example, young learners may experience anxiety about adapting from a highly structured school system to a learning environment that requires an independent and autonomous approach to learning.

In order to negotiate this new academic territory successfully, both sets of learners need to understand what constitutes effective learning, and how they can put into these key learning principles into practice. Effective learning can be defined as an activity that explicitly involves a learner in metacognitive processes such as planning, self-assessing and reflecting (Biggs & Moore, 1993). Watkins, Carnell, Lodge, Wagner, and Whalley (2001) trace how the term meta-cognition has developed, since it was originally coined by Flavell in 1976, into broader meanings that encompass the esoteric pursuit of thinking about thinking for its own sake, and more practical pedagogies of study skills. Higher education has a long established tradition of study skills instruction as part of induction, but it is unclear whether this is based on a more theoretical approach to meta-learning (learning about learning) or is confined to the provision of a skills agenda.

There are conflicting accounts about the usefulness of approaches to learning research in higher education. Haggis (2003) raises concerns about the lack of criticality evident in the presentation of the

concepts that underpin the research, and about suggestions for their application in teaching and learning practice. Broad support for these issues in the higher education teaching community is debatable. Partly as a consequence of this, the general understanding of effective learning among students is a particular challenge. Marshall and Case (2005) argue for the importance of context and point out that it is possible for a learner to adopt a deep, or meta-cognitive, approach to some tasks in some contexts, and a superficial approach in others. The implication of this for induction programmes is that students may need to be introduced to a variety of approaches to learning so that they can select from a repertoire in order to learn most effectively.

Mackie (1998) argues that learning and transitions are psycho-social experiences that can cause anxiety, not least because the sense of self is both challenged and subject to change. For example, students may experience insecurity about accommodation and friendship groups, together with organisational inadequacies which may include impersonal, negative induction experiences and associated concerns about administrative support. Students arriving at university are often disorientated, finding the institution to be 'daunting and faceless' (Moore, 1995). Edward and Middleton (1997) argue that an effective induction into an occupational or academic identity helps the learner feel more secure. It is this security that promotes a willingness to learn.

Martinez (1995) argues that in adult and further education, normally sub-degree education, the causes of non-progression are multi-faceted, complex and highly context-specific. The decision to withdraw is often the outcome of interplay between cultural, organisational and external factors, the major ones of which are identified in Figure 1 below. Interestingly, research conducted by the UK Government's Department of Education and Skills (DfES Statistical Bulletin, 1992) concluded that non-progression rates were higher for men than for women and varied between subjects. They were higher for students entering with lower formal qualifications and were also related to the age of the student. Building on these issues as they have arisen in her research, Johnston (1997) suggests there are six strategies that can have an impact on student retention rates:

- Improvement to the quality of student data, and course tutors' and administrators' access to it;
- Institution-wide promotion of strategies to enhance student retention;
- Minimum attendance requirement for all first-year students;
- Visible pastoral support and proactive models of student care;
- Increase in study skills provision and subject-specific support classes; and
- Increased support for students who chose the 'wrong' course, for example counselling and advice about changing or withdrawing.

It is evident, therefore, that effective induction is not just a Week One affair as it involves more than the didactic provision of information on the institution's part, if it is to be effective. A key question emerges: to what extent should induction reflect the nature of the student cohort? In other words, should support be student-centred and, if so, to what extent? We argue for the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of induction programmes: the lessons learned should firstly be identified, and then incorporated into subsequent cycles of support. The remainder of this paper discusses findings of case-analyses from a cross-section of UK HE institutions.

Methodology

This research adopts a case study approach. Case studies are appropriate when the focus is on contemporary events, where there is no control over behaviour associated with these events and when contextual conditions are pertinent to the phenomenon being studied (Burns, 2000; Mason, 2002; Yin, 2003). The cases were selected purposively (Maxwell, 1980), on the basis of their ability to provide a wide range of actual transition processes and practices and as a means of providing maximum variation and insight. On this basis, this paper draws on a series of examples of induction taken from a cross-section of five UK higher education institutions. This approach enables us to investigate the

phenomena of transitions into HE more effectively than other methods, such as large questionnaire surveys, because it focuses on how relationships and processes interconnect (Denscombe, 1998). The aim of the research is to provide explanatory investigations, so, following Maxwell's (2004) argument in favour of qualitative approaches in educational research, qualitative approaches have been adopted. In this research, the phenomenon was the range of approaches used by the institutions in which students are supported in their induction into HE. Initially, these activities were identified through the contribution of a network of National Teacher Fellows (the authors), who were each awarded fellowships as a result of their contributions to supporting the practice and promulgation of good teaching and learning processes. These are not exclusively related to the phenomena on which this paper is based, but all of us are involved in supporting student transitions into higher education in the UK. Of this approach, it is noted that case studies also encompass the use of multiple sources of data, which increases the accuracy of findings; these varied sources of information thus provide a corroborative mode of enquiry (Burns, 2000; Denscombe, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2003). A detailed presentation of the resultant findings is not within the scope of this paper. We will instead identify key patterns from the cases, and discuss these below.

Key patterns

Firstly, it is important to state that induction is typically one of a number of components that support student transition into higher education. These comparisons may include activities which take place during year 0, year 1, year 2, year 3, through to postgraduate studies and finally as a preparation for the world of work. Few induction schemes recognise that the transition process begins within the student's previous institution. Indeed, Cook, Rushton, McCormick, and Southall (2005) found very little consensus about the nature of the induction process, or the challenges that it provides. The level of investment going into the transition into higher education in the UK with AimHigher activities, Widening Participation and student retention programmes suggests that the UK higher education sector has only recently begun to address these challenges in a coordinated way. However, in the absence of a strong tradition of literature in this field of endeavour, the extent to which these activities are evaluated, research-led or at the very least based on the evidence is not entirely clear.

Table 1 provides a summary of the data collected comparing induction activities at five institutions from the perspectives of the students. The columns identify each institution with a letter. The actual institution represented is less important than the comparison, so it was felt best to anonymise the institutional information. The rows in the table identify the main elements in induction activities, most of which appear to focus on 'Week Zero' (or 'Induction Week', as it is called in some institutions), that is, the week before formal teaching begins. However, in a number of institutions there is a clear attempt to extend 'induction' activities beyond this first week. Table 1 also indicates the similarities and differences of the basic structure of activities. All institutions provide basic information about their organisations, their structures and regulations. Some, though, provide this information in the form of documents, some in short lectures, while others provide both. The growing use of IT programmes also provided a source of data. All programmes provide introductions to the computing facilities, such as e-mail and learning management systems. However, not all provide tours of the library, the local area or of the campus. Only three provide social activities and diagnostic tests.

There is a growing volume of literature on the first-year experience, retention and the widening participation. This last term has come to mean, in the UK, the broadening of involvement in HE by non-traditional groups in the population, such as the children of families with no prior experience of HE, members of ethnic minorities and people from particular geographic locations where HE participation is traditionally low. Some literature has already been discussed above, but it is surprising that a clearer pattern does not emerge from our relatively limited set of comparisons. It could reasonably be expected that if there was a strong research-led body of work in this area, there would be some consensus in regard to the activities that should be provided as part of the induction of first year students. Even more surprising are the differing viewpoints on the importance of each element, as evidenced by their appearance or absence in Table 1. For example, in some cases, a clearly stated

policy decision was taken to remove campus tours or social activities from the induction programme, whereas these have been consciously introduced in others. It would be interesting to review an international set of case studies to see if there is a consensus at that level. This may be particularly useful in light of longer-term coordinated initiatives in the US, for example, with the First Year Initiative of the Policy Centre on the First Year of College, and a recent national ten-year review in Australia (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnes, 2005).

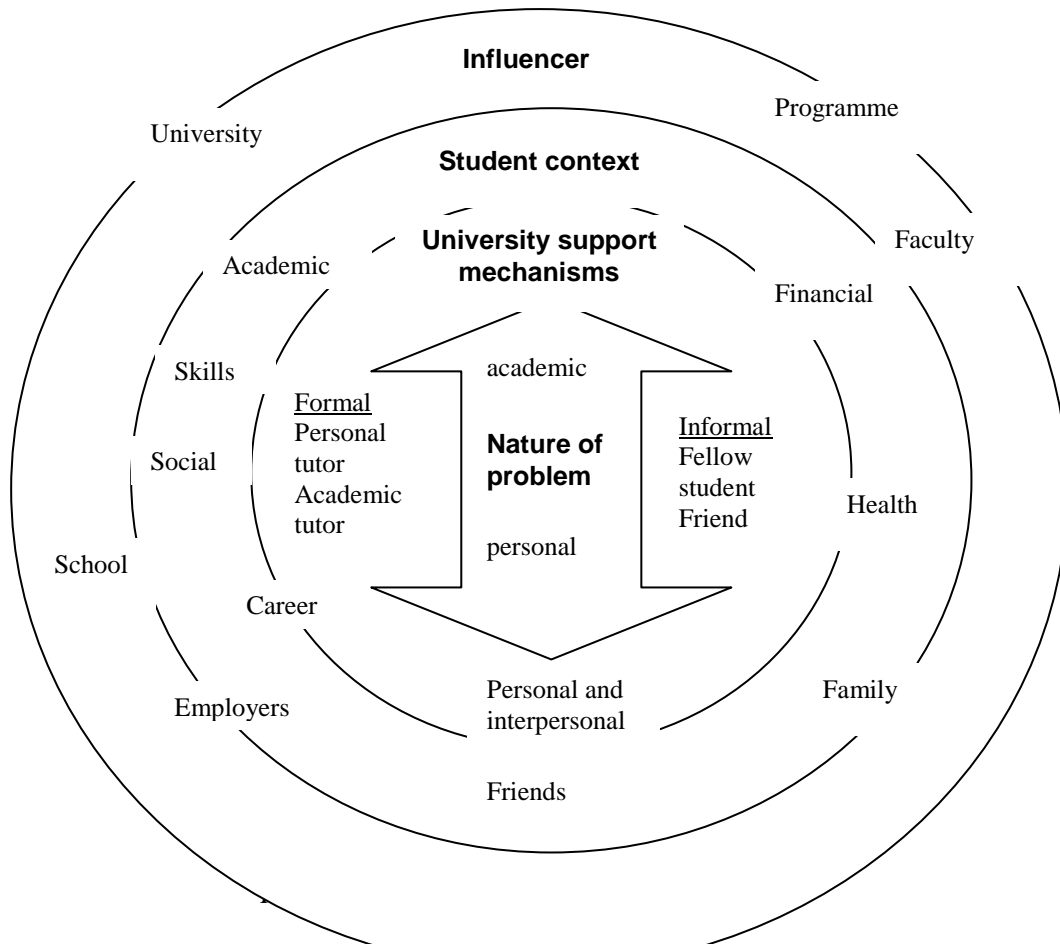
Table 1. *Comparison of induction activities*

Components	Institution A	Institution B	Institution C	Institution D	Institution E
Library tour	1 hour online intro	Central	Library provides for large programmes	Provided by library	Library organised, including online/paper library skills workbook
Computer induction	Week 0 and then in-module: LPD ^a	Induction workshop	Part of library induction	Central	1 hour basic workshop
Social events	Field course	Induction workshop, by student helper	Some		Faculty and department By department
Campus tour			For international students only		
Tour of local area			For international students only		Some programmes
Information about university structures & processes	Centrally provided as part of programme meetings and followed up in modules	Online or handbook format	Director of Students gives 1 hour lecture	Sent in pre-Induction pack; covered in programme workshops	Faculty and some central service, e.g., careers, finance, etc.
Diagnostic testing	Student self-evaluation in portfolio			Students complete PSE ^b ; mature, overseas needs identified in interviews.	After Week 1 maths diagnostic
Study skills induction	In-module: LPD	In-module: Preparing for Business	By department		Week 0 Limited (see below)
Tutorial support	Semester 1: 1 hour per week	Department within a central framework	Centrally run system, but professional programmes run their own		Meet Personal Tutors Week 0
Pastoral support	Department	Department within a central framework	Provided by chaplaincy	Central provision	Through Personal Tutors provided by programme
Other relevant activities	Beyond Week 1 induction programme	Beyond Week 1 programme; Pre-sessional 'Welcome to UK' for overseas students	Civic welcome involves MP, Mayor, etc.; Piloting extra induction for mature students	Beyond Week 1 skills workshops offered	Beyond Week 1 programme

^aLPD—Learning and Personal Development ^bPSE — Personal skills evaluation

The students' personal context

Having reviewed a range of institutions' approaches, we now turn our attention to the students. It is useful to situate learners in their personal context, as a means of understanding the new students' approaches to problem-solving and decision-making activities, especially those associated with induction. In particular, this approach helps with understanding those problems associated with becoming engaged - or not - with their new milieu and all it has to offer. As we note above, context is an important determinant of deciding whether to stay or go. Thus such a contextual location exercise will enable us to identify those factors which may influence this decision-making process. Figure 1 provides a model that summarises this context within the HE environment.



At the centre of the model, a student may solve a problem they have identified either by using formal or informal support mechanisms (the innermost circle). Formal mechanisms will include those provided by the institution in order to facilitate the student's decision-making. Informal mechanisms relate to the student's personal connections within the institution, and their network of friends and peers. There may well be an interplay between these two sources of support, depending on the student's personal context (the second circle). Here, the model identifies the range of factors that may give rise to the need for problem-solving. The outer circle identifies the range of possible influences that there may be on their personal context: these may depend on home, prior education, and social and working lives. There may also be a preconception of higher education's role, and what it has to offer, as a result of the student's recruitment process, at institution, faculty and programmes levels. Clearly, this range of influences and their relative impact is complex to navigate from the student's perspective and difficult for the receiving institution to manage, especially as many institutions appear to have only partially identified the range of possible influencing factors. There may well also be issues surrounding the development of the individual student's autonomy if an institution unilaterally

attempted to address all these issues, not least because to do so may well result in the development of a dependency mode of decision-making behaviour in the student.

Many of these issues and those suggestions of Johnston (1997) above could be initiated during a traditional induction week and then extended into the first year of the academic programme.

Our findings also indicate a number of common dimensions which are addressed to differing degrees within the case study institutions:

- Social-emotional dimension – the extent to which we encourage students to move beyond an emotional response into deeper learning varies considerably.
- Immersion into the language of a discipline – it is not at all clear how we encourage students to think themselves into a subject. This is something that can be a particular issue in large courses or multi-disciplinary courses, where two or more departments may have responsibility for pastoral, tutorial or administrative support.
- There is an acknowledgement of the importance of encouraging student awareness of learning preferences and styles and an awareness of learning theory. It is not clear, though, to what extent these ideas are incorporated into traditional study support activities. There is a range of activities that are loosely grouped under the category of ‘study skills’ but work occupies a continuum from purely technical work (such as how to write a bibliography) to a deeper consideration of what learning is, the development of a ‘meta-learning’ vocabulary and some diagnosis of learning skills and styles. There appear to be different foci in these activities, but there is invariably some instruction provided on the process of studying, however that may be defined.

Discussion

A full breakdown of induction activities has been identified in Table 1. Our case analysis reveals the extent to which induction programmes are designed to take account of a diverse student population and how technology is now being used in a variety of ways. It has also been possible to match these with the two discourses identified by Zepke and Leach (2005): integration/assimilation and adaptation summarised in Table 2. The provision of skills development through a variety of means, extended modules and programme specific events are mechanisms by which our institutions have sought to integrate a diverse student population. Yet at the same time the case analysis reveals how the delivery of such provision is also being adapted through the use of technology, notably various forms of web-based provision to accommodate the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. Moreover, technology is being used to audit student skills through diagnostic testing and, as a consequence, enabling specific support to be provided for students.

Table 2. *The role of technology in transformation by integration or adaptation discourses*

	Diverse student body	Role of technology
Integration/ Assimilation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills development • Learning beyond the first week (modules and support) • Academic referencing • Programme-specific events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diagnostic testing • Formative assessment
Adaptation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of helpdesks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web based support information and services

- Generic tours
 - Web based delivery of skills modules (flexibility)
-

Together Tables 1 and 2 show how institutions can develop very different induction activities, reflecting the complex environment as shown in Figure 1. Recognition of this complex environment has led to the development of one-stop-shop help-desks and the use of web-based sources of information.

Conclusions and suggestions for further research

This analysis suggests that there are specific implications for further research. The growing body of literature on this subject does not address the fundamental question of whether institutions expect partial or complete integration of new students, and what that means both for the institutions and for the students. This leads to a related question of the extent to which adaptation versus integration provides advantages and disadvantages to both students and institutions. While we have found there is some research and analysis on the issue of the first-year experience on the one hand, and on the internationalisation of higher education on the other, the extent to which institutions are adapting to increased diversity from widening participation and overseas recruitment is far from clear or indeed uniform. We need to discover what, during their initial encounter with their university, encourages or discourages students to integrate (wholesale immersion in HE), adapt (partial change in respect of class-room interactions) or reject their opportunity to experience higher education and leave their course.

It may be useful to identify a set of elements that institutions could consider as a benchmarking tool to effectively welcome and thus retain their new students. These should not, however, be exclusive or rigid but rather used as a starting point. We recognise that there will always be a tension between what the receiving institution wants to provide and what their new students want to receive. Nevertheless, benchmarking institutional practices is one basis on which a range of mechanisms may be designed in order to support the student transition processes more effectively. Such an approach can begin by providing a comprehensive list of activities that may, depending on context, be selectively utilised. In order to improve and enhance the first year experience and to improve the retention rates in universities, it is important to consider a sector wide benchmark that is research led. Our study has identified relevant research funded by key national UK agencies that appear to have had limited impact on the sector as a whole. Considering the body of knowledge that has been developed in recent years in the UK and abroad, it is remarkable that our study found such a range of approaches and structures in play during the induction process, few of which appear to have been informed by this pre-existing body of knowledge.

The level of investment in staff time and support in the student induction process across all the institutions implies that each institution considers this process to be of considerable importance. There is, however, a need to accept that induction is an integral and profoundly significant part of students' first experience at the case study institutions and as such this demands appropriate evidence-based practice to ensure that this is positive. It is surprising to note the reticence of the HE teaching community to make use of the available 'learning to learn' research.

While the institutions in this study have mobilised considerable resources to focus on inducting new entrants, they need to be aware of the fact that first impressions count. If they wish to effectively welcome their new students they need to take into account the circumstances of these newcomers in such a way that their involvement in the institution, whether integration or adaptation, will be encouraged. Finally, one of the clear findings from the reviews of the literature on the student experience of university, the first year in education and the experience of non-completion, is that this can result in significant psychological or financial cost. There is an ethical imperative to ensure that students, who have been attracted by increasingly competitive marketing of courses and

encouragement to widen participation, have access to the information and support necessary to make the right decision about their education and their future.

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