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At the University

Transition Review

Transition Review is an opportunity to review the progress of all first year and direct entry undergraduate students since their arrival at University. One of the functions of Transition Review is to ensure that these students are actively engaging in their transition to university and are fully aware of the opportunities and resources available to support their studies. For academic year 2013-2014, the Transition Review period will take place during weeks 1 and 6 of the second semester (from 13 January 2014 and 21 February 2014). School and Department Senior Tutors will determine the most appropriate period for Transition Review.

Support for Transition Review

During Transition Review, Academic Skills Centre (ASC) staff and Library Subject Advisers will be offering undergraduate students additional sessions to boost their academic success. The programme will run throughout February 2014 and will cover topics such as effective research techniques, help with referencing, essay planning and academic writing. ASC is also offering generic sessions on critical thinking, time-management, and improving revision, examination and presentation skills.

Alternatively, ASC staff are happy to meet with students for a confidential 1:1 session on any aspect of their academic work.

A full Transition Review programme will be available on the ASC website (see below) before the end of this term and the regular workshop offer will also be available for all undergraduates throughout January 2014.

Students can also develop their academic skills independently by consulting The Guide to Effective Learning website.

Contextualised sessions
The main focus of the ASC is to ensure that all undergraduate students have the opportunity to fulfil their academic potential and develop strategies to help them to achieve their academic goals.

One way in which this can be achieved is to develop, in collaboration with academic staff, a range of relevant, subject-specific, bespoke skills modules. This academic year, the ASC has already worked with colleagues in Business, Education, Law, Medicine and Physics to provide subject-specific support to their students by delivering courses such as note taking; presentation skills; essay writing and literature reviews. The ASC is keen to continue to develop subject-specific provision in conjunction with academic members of staff.

If you would like to discuss contextualised sessions or support, or the offer for Transition Review, please contact the ASC, details below.

Academic Skills Centre: www.intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/asc
Follow on Twitter: @UoBASC
Email: asc@contact.bham.ac.uk
Subject Adviser information and appointments: www.intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/library/subject

Tackling the Mathematics Problem

Mathematics and statistics form important components within a range of degree programmes, yet many students often struggle with these subjects particularly as they make the transition to university study. This so called 'mathematics problem' is now well documented and may be evident in a number of ways:

- A lack of core mathematical knowledge and concepts traditionally expected of students at the transition to university study;
- A lack of fluency in applying mathematics and specifically an inability to model and solve (unfamiliar) problems;
- Students, not studying sufficient mathematics prior to university entry particularly in disciplines outside of engineering, mathematics and physics.

To ensure students within all disciplines are able to access support to aid their learning of mathematics and statistics the University of Birmingham opened a mathematics support centre in October 2012 which is based within the main Library and forms part of the Academic Skills Centre. In its first year of operation, the Centre received over 500 student visits, and in this academic year to date over 270 visits have been made by students from a wide range of disciplines.

Students can drop-in to the mathematics support centre anytime during its hours of opening and receive one-to-one help with any mathematics or statistics based problem without making an appointment. It provides a relaxed and friendly environment where experienced mathematicians help students with any mathematical difficulties they may have to develop both their skills and confidence.

Programme and Module Specification Project

After consultation with Directors of Education and the Pro Vice Chancellor for Education it was decided that Registry would lead on a project to update all active programme and module specifications held centrally in Banner, ready for the start of the 2014/15 academic session. It is a QAA requirement that the University holds an accurate record of all programme and module specifications and over a number of years there has been some divergence in what is held in Banner and what is held locally in Schools. The project will commence in January 2014 and conclude by the end of May 2014.

Due to the large number of specifications involved it was deemed impractical for Schools to be asked to follow the existing modification processes and so for the duration of the exercise these approval processes will be relaxed to enable bulk approval of modifications.

BOXI reports have been created to show all active programme and module
specifications that require updating. IT Services have developed a BIRMS interface to allow Schools to update their specifications directly without the need to submit paperwork to CMT. BIRMS security managers will be able to allocate different levels of access to users depending on their responsibilities with only selected users being given permission to approve modifications. By approving modifications through the interface Schools are confirming that the changes have been through the relevant committees at School and College level. Once modifications have been approved they will feed directly in to Banner and will be published online through the recently revamped programmes and modules handbook. Alternatively Schools are given the option of returning track changed Excel spreadsheets for CMT to enter modifications in to Banner.

In order to reduce the number of module specifications requiring update, CMT have circulated to Colleges a list of modules that are currently active but have had no student registrations for three or more years. Colleges will be given the opportunity to withdraw these modules en masse thus ensuring that they do not appear on the BOXI report of active modules that require updating.

The Birmingham Project - Briefing

A key element in the Undergraduate Curriculum Review, the Birmingham Project offers first year undergraduates from across the Institution the opportunity of collaborating on the delivery of an interdisciplinary research project for two weeks at the end of the academic year.

Students will work in cross-College ‘Challenge Groups’ of c. 8, gathered into ‘Clusters’ of related challenges, each led by an academic with PGTA support. Each Challenge Group will produce an open educational resource to address a particular interdisciplinary research question in the two week project period. During the two weeks, they will be supported by a series of training sessions on issues such as project management, team leadership, presentation skills, web design, etc., with input from major external partner organisations and support from the University’s Academic Skills Centre, the Library and other academic services. At the end of the project, the Challenge Groups will present their resource to their peers in the Cluster, and the best resources from each Cluster of projects will be selected to go on to a final presentation in the Great Hall in front of senior staff and external partners as well as their peers.

Participating students will therefore benefit from the opportunity of learning to collaborate across disciplines on a strictly-time limited research project; from the chance to meet and learn from senior leaders of major national and regional companies and governmental and cultural organisations; and from a range of high-quality professional training options, all of which will be hugely beneficial for their CV and employability prospects as well as significant for their confidence and personal development.

The Birmingham Project has been validated as a 10-credit module for the Personal Skills Award and will be open to all first years, though spaces are strictly limited for 2013 for the pilot phase of the project.

We are currently recruiting students for the trial in 2013-14 and will be emailing all first year undergraduates in the next week to offer them this opportunity. Please advise any students who contact you about the project to email the project team at thebirminghamproject@contacts.bham.ac.uk with any questions, and if you have students who you would particularly like to recommend to us, please let us have their names and addresses.

If you have further questions on the design and delivery of the project or would like to know more about it, you can also email us at the above address. We are also looking for further academic staff to be involved in leading projects in 2014-15, so if you are interested in being involved in the project as it goes forward, please email the project academic lead, Dr Andrew Davies.

External news
External examiners' understanding and use of academic standards

Research by Oxford Brookes University and the University of Cumbria, funded by QAA and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and published today, has looked at the issue of external examining. The aim of the research was to help the higher education sector see how external examiners understand standards, and how they use that understanding to give advice and recommendations to universities. Its findings show the importance of developing a shared understanding of the frameworks for standards in institutions, and the need for serious levels of engagement with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

Source and more information on the QAA website.

Economics of Higher Education

An online network aims to bring policymakers together with academics studying higher education, potentially stimulating new research on neglected areas such as the effectiveness of access spending.

The "Economics of Higher Education" network, which officially launched on 20 November, is being led by two London School of Economics academics, with sponsorship from Universities UK and the Economic and Social Research Council.

Read the source article on the Times Higher Education website or see the Economics of Higher Education website for more information.

Consultation on draft guidance for UK higher education providers on education for sustainable development

Consultation on draft guidance for UK higher education providers on education for sustainable development. This consultation invites comments on draft new guidance for UK higher education providers on education for sustainable development. This guidance is intended to be of practical help to those wishing to embed or include an understanding of sustainable development issues within the student academic experience. QAA and the Higher Education Academy worked with an expert group in developing the draft guidance. We now wish to gather wider views from the higher education community and stakeholders in order to further shape the draft, prior to final publication in early 2014. The consultation is open until 3 January 2014.

Source and more information on the QAA website.

Education Matters
www.intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/educationmatters

Please contact Dr C Teeling for information.

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