

## **Case Study 4      Speech and Language Sciences**

### *Background*

This report provides an overview of the findings from a study of the School of Speech and Language Science's Student Induction programme. The focus on the Speech and Language Sciences Induction programme was part of a wider investigation into the nature of transition from school and college to university. The project, Bridging the Gap, was funded by Newcastle University to explore the range of transition activities operating within educational institutions across the North-East of England. Findings are based on data drawn from the University wide survey, an interview with the DPD Speech and Language Sciences and the survey administered to the Speech and Language students. Speech and Language Sciences at Newcastle University is one of the leading teaching and research units in the UK devoted to the study of normal communicative processes and communication disorders in children and adults. The School of Speech and Language offers two degree programmes that lead to a qualification as a Speech and Language Therapist:

1. BSc (Hons) Speech & Language Sciences (4 years, full-time)
2. MSc Language Pathology (2 years, full-time)

These programmes are recognised by the UK's Health Professions Council and the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists. These programmes were awarded the highest grade possible in several recent external reviews of teaching. Most recently, the BSc (Hons) Speech and Language Sciences was rated in the National Student Survey 2009 as the best Speech and Language Therapy course in the UK.

The School of Speech and Language also offers two postgraduate degree programmes in research training:

1. MPhil
2. PhD Speech & Language Sciences

### **Aims and Objectives**

The aim of the Speech and Language Sciences (SLS) induction programme, according to the Degree programme Director (DPD) is to:

“Ease transition and anxiety around the first year of the SLS course, especially around writing assignments and organising study”. (Survey Data)

The Speech and Language Induction programme comprises a 'standard' and 'extended' programme of activities. The 'standard' programme is normally offered during Freshers' week and includes:

- Introduction to the BSc Stage 1 Speech and Language course
- An opportunity to meet stage 4 students

- Introduction to the School computing facilities
- A tour of the Walton library (medical)
- An introduction to clinical education.

The 'extended' elements of the induction programme are offered, with the exception of the initial group meetings with tutors, after induction week. The purpose of the extended induction activities was to:

“Help stage 1 students with transition, focusing on self-directed learning and writing assignments”. (Survey data)

The extended induction includes the following activities:

- Using the library effectively
- Writing essays (under exam- and non exam-conditions)
- A group meeting with course tutors at the end of induction week
- Two further group meetings with course tutors between the end of induction week and the end of the autumn term.

### **Exploring impact**

Did the induction activities help to ease transition and develop students' independent and self-directed learning? It may only be possible to answer these questions through recourse to longer-term data such as student assessments. However, looking at the results of the survey in general terms, it seems that the various induction activities offered were in the main viewed as helpful by most of the survey respondents. We can only speculate as to whether or not the findings were generally the same for non-respondents. A larger response rate may have resulted in data that are more conclusive. The data from the student survey are presented below in order to show how they felt about their induction experiences. Student ratings of specific induction activities are presented in writing simply to save space. Charts are presented in the appendices to the main report.

#### *The Standard Induction*

*Students were asked: How helpful was the introduction to the BSc Speech and Language?*

Thirteen responded to this question. Nine of the students felt the introduction had been moderately helpful while one thought it had been very helpful.

Twelve of the students provided additional written comments and practically all of these were positive about this aspect of the induction, focusing specifically on the importance of meeting other students and staff as in the following two comments:

*Meeting some staff members and fellow students, a good way to meet those from your halls on the same course.*

*Meeting our tutor was helpful during the semester as we were able to discuss any issues we had.*

Or just to get an overview of the course itself:

*Introductory lesson giving out booklets, info etc. This was helpful so we knew what we would be doing in the first week. Also gave us a chance to get to know other students.*

*Answered many of my questions and lay down the foundations for the rest of the course. Got to know a few of my class mates.*

Students were asked if they found any aspects of the course introduction unhelpful. Again, the opportunity to interact more with their peers on the course and those outside in the wider university seem to be key points:

*The introduction to the course was interesting and I enjoyed getting to know some of the people on the course however, feel it would have been a better ice breaker had we switched around and got to know a few more of those on our course - I only spoke to two on the first day and with living at home, would liked to have spoken to a few more people. I think this would have helped me settle in better in Freshers' week.*

Another student felt that some sort of team building exercise might have been helpful:

*Spoke one on one to class mates, larger groups may have been better for introductions perhaps through a group task/ team building exercise.*

Stepping outside the actual course itself was also viewed as important as the following comment suggests:

*I thought that there were too many lectures meaning that we did not have the opportunity to partake in the activities provided during Freshers' week and meet new people. I also thought that many of the lectures were pointless to help introduce me to the course and I found them quite unhelpful*

Clearly, one felt the acute need for some sort of refresher course in physiology and anatomy:

*It not so much that there were UNHELPFUL elements, but the program could have been more helpful. The introduction to the BSc was good but it didn't prepare me for what was coming! I think I did my course research pretty well before coming to Uni and was not aware of all the elements of the course, or at least the importance of some. In particular, students who had not done the sciences at school or had been away from education for*

*some time were not at all prepared for the physiology or anatomy aspects of the course. Perhaps there could be some introduction to/refresher short course in the induction week - we didn't do that much so I'm sure there would be time.*

It seems that two elements emerge from the comments here: the importance of meeting students generally during Freshers' week but also specifically those on the same course. Interaction on both levels is necessary to help students settle in. However, it seems that the induction activities may clash with the other social elements offered during Freshers' week.

*Students were asked: How helpful was the opportunity to meet stage 4 students?*

Twelve students rated the opportunity to meet stage 4 students. Eight viewed the experience as moderately helpful, two rated it as very helpful, one slightly helpful and one not at all helpful.

Most students found this aspect of their induction positive and helpful as the following comments suggest:

*Useful to hear how they found the first year, they were able to answer our questions and give us reassurance, definitely an element which should be kept for following years.*

One respondent felt it might have been more useful to meet up with stage 2 students:

*It was good to hear from some people with first-hand experience but maybe speaking to some second years would have been more beneficial. The fourth years didn't seem to remember their first year that clearly.*

In terms of negative aspects of meeting stage 4 students, one student felt that:

*Meeting the stage 4 students (only the 2 reps) was more of them chatting to us about the course and then us asking questions. To be honest, we didn't really know what questions to ask at that stage. It would have been much better to have had a social event of some sorts - even just coffee - with the stage 2 students who had just gone through first year. Question and answers are fine but we had no idea what was before us so didn't really know what to ask.*

Another felt that:

*Didn't really get much information. Also may have been more helpful to do this at the open day rather than the induction to the course as many of my initial questions I had to research and thus already had answers before starting the course.*

*Students were asked: How helpful was the Introduction to the School's computing facilities*

The introduction comprised a short talk from one of the School's Technical Support Officers about email, using computer and department facilities. The purpose of the introduction was

to “flag up what facilities are available including those specific to the section or likely to be used while on this particular course”. Students were shown how to “access lists of resources and information on booking, etc”.

Six found the experience moderately helpful, four found it slightly helpful and two found it not at all helpful.

Students felt that the introduction to the school’s computing facilities was in the main helpful as the following comments suggest:

*A good general introduction and quite informative*

*Quite helpful, particularly learning how to use the library site.*

Negative comments focused on the timing of the introduction,

*Should have been given earlier as this occurred after the induction week.*

This student felt that the introduction should have taken place earlier claiming it took place after induction week when it actually took place on day 1 of induction week. The student may have confused the School’s introduction to computing facilities with one laid on by the Information, Systems and Services Department of Newcastle University after induction week. There are clearly a number of induction activities for students, which may result in confusion when it comes to remembering and evaluating each one of them.

Other students were critical of the duration of the event claiming it:

*Was very brief*

*Perhaps too long*

Technical problems,

*The introduction to the computing facilities was a carry-on. Even though I had already gone through the password changing process online, the system had a paddy and refused to recognise me. The person taking the session had no idea how to rectify this so I spent the whole time waiting in the IT support place getting it sorted.*

And the need for handouts:

*A handout of the slides should have been given.*

*They could have printed out notes as I forgot most of what I learned so was a bit stuck when I needed help.*

Overall, the introduction seems to have been useful, but comments suggest that the event needs a bit of fine-tuning to make it more helpful.

*Students were asked: How helpful was the tour of the Walton library (medical)*

Opinion seems a little more divided about the library tour with five students rating it as moderately helpful, four slightly helpful, two very helpful, and one finding it not at all helpful.

Students found the tour interesting and informative, as the following comments suggest:

*The lady was informative about the services at the library*

*Visited relevant parts of the library to our course, had to visit photocopying areas, look for books etc.*

*I have never really had to use a library like that before and it was nice to have it explained to me*

However, it seems that many of the students felt the 'tour' was a 'talk' rather than a tour and would have actually preferred the tour.

*Not so much a tour but a talk, however a tour wasn't really needed.*

*We were given a quiz and had to fill it in by ourselves. I think it would have been more helpful if someone had given us a tour and shown us how to use the facilities, as I was confused about a few things and had to ask my peers.*

*It wasn't a tour rather a talk therefore we were none the wiser where anything was in the library however we were told the services that are offered.*

It may be the case that students, in answering this particular question, may have confused it with an earlier session in the Robinson Library offered during Freshers' Week. Clearly, this highlights the importance of getting feedback about induction activities as soon as possible after the event.

Some students felt that the tour was too short:

*A very, very, short session and was not worth it.*

*Most of the things explained you would have to do for yourself to get a better understanding of*

On the whole, the tour of the library appears to have been useful in the superficial sense of showing them where it is. There seems to be a suggestion that a more interactive, hands on session might have been more useful.

*Students were asked: How helpful was the introduction to clinical education.*

Seven of the students found the introduction moderately helpful, four slightly helpful and two very helpful.

*Interesting to find out what we would be learning in this module, and the placements we would have this year and following years.*

*The intro to Clin Ed was good. If we had had a presentation like that for every module we would have been much more prepared for our first lecture - just what we would be learning and what we needed to bring.*

However, some also found it to be unnecessary:

*Possibly not necessary as clinical education sessions followed giving more information.*

*Wasn't really necessary as everything was explained in first clinical education lesson.*

*Probably not necessary, went a bit too slow at the beginning of term then there was a rush of information towards the end.*

*Apart from the above I did not find out anything else that I did not already know or which was helpful to know before starting the course.*

While the introduction appears to have been viewed as useful and informative, there seems to be an issue around whether the same information may be available from later formal sessions.

### **The Extended Induction**

*Students were asked: How helpful was the 'Using the Library Effectively' session?*

Four students found the session slightly helpful, Three students found it moderately helpful, two found it very helpful and two found it not at all helpful.

Positive aspects about the 'using the library effectively' session include:

*Good introduction to the library, got used to the facilities and made it easier when returning on own.*

*It was good to get into the library and feel that we had some idea where we were going to find relevant texts*

*Hands on experience of using the library and learning organisation.*

Negative aspects of using the Library effectively:

*It was a little late in the term so I knew already what was being taught*

*It wasn't very helpful because by the time we had this session, most of us had had to teach ourselves how to use the library*

*Some parts were pointless and it did not include some things that I think are important such as how to rent out group rooms and how to activate the internet on your laptop in the library*

*How helpful to you personally was the 'Writing Essays under exam and non-exam conditions' session?*

Five of the students found this session moderately helpful, three found it slightly helpful, one found it very helpful and one found it not at all helpful.

Students identified some positive aspects of the session including:

*Explained how to structure essays, where to go to get help*

*I felt happy knowing that there was somewhere I could go if I needed help with essay writing.*

*It was interesting to see what was and was not acceptable when writing an Assignment*

*As I come from a background that hasn't really needed essays I found this informative.*

On the negative side, one student found the session:

*Slightly boring - very much the same as what had been learnt at A level.*

Another claimed:

*I have not used anything learnt from the lecture since I have had it*

*Students were asked: How helpful to you personally was the Group Meeting with your tutor during induction week?*

Most of the respondents found the group meeting with their tutor during induction week moderately helpful. Three found it very helpful, one found it slightly helpful while the remaining respondent found it not at all helpful.

Students identified some positive aspects of the meeting including:

*Good to meet other students, made aware of who to contact if you had a problem and made you feel as though you had someone to support you.*

*Good to hear what other course mates were thinking too and to meet the tutor who was friendly and made us feel we could come to her at any point.*

*It was good to get to know my tutor and be able to discuss how I was settling in. Could ask more in depth questions and knew who to go to if anything went wrong.*

On the negative side, some students felt:

*I didn't really see the point of the group meeting. If anyone had any problems I don't think they would have said anything in the group.*

*I didn't feel that we had much time to ask questions.*

*I would have preferred to have an individual meeting - I didn't know any of the other girls at this point and felt a bit uncomfortable discussing some things in front of them. I don't know how much I had in common (in term of initial settling in and adjustment stuff) with the others and felt uncomfortable.*

*I found a few people in the tutor group dominated the group meeting. many were not heard.*

*Students were asked: How helpful to you personally were the subsequent Group Meetings with your tutor during the first term?*

Students, again, were quite positive about subsequent meetings with their tutor. Seven felt the meetings had been moderately helpful, three found them slightly helpful and one found the meetings very helpful.

*A nice catch up to talk about any issues, and gave reassurance and support.*

*Could discuss problems with peers as well as tutor.*

*Again, good to be able to discuss issues with our tutor.*

Clearly, not everyone is happy with the tutor system as suggested in the following comments:

*I have found the tutor system fairly unhelpful all the way through. It has felt very impersonal and I can't believe we didn't have to meet our tutors more often - not at all in the second term. The group meetings were interesting but there was no sense of it being about issues that affect first year students.*

*Although I am happy with my personal tutor I know others have not had the same experience. I think there may be some senior members of staff that are super good at what they do but aren't really cut out for this type of mentoring role. Some comments I have heard about are not necessarily inappropriate but do show a lack of communication/people skills. I think in general the personal tutor system needs looking at. I think it is essential to build a relationship that is personal . . .*

*Not perhaps a group chat. I don't like the idea that we were asked to mail our tutors in January to let them know if we made it back. Shouldn't they be finding out if we were ok? I think contact should be much more regular and supportive.*

*Often did not need them. would have been more effective in revision time as that is when support was most needed.*

*Overall, how useful to you personally was the Speech and Language Extended Induction Programme?*

Opinion was divided about the overall helpfulness of the extended induction programme with six rating it as moderately helpful, five rating it as slightly helpful and one rating it as very helpful.

Students were asked: What could the Speech and Language Department do to improve their Extended Induction Programme? It is clear that students view Freshers' week as of fundamental importance in developing the social aspects of university life and felt occasionally that induction activities were hampering this:

*They could not make first years come in every day because a lot of the stuff could be put together on one day. it is important to remember that during Freshers' week, freshers have to go out every night to make friends etc, so having to come in every day at 9am was a pain. Freshers also have to buy the wristband, which is very expensive, but they can't make full use of it by going on day activities because we had to go to these introductory lectures.*

*More ice breakers so that people on the course get to know each other that first week. A tour of the library led by someone, rather than being given a quiz to fill in.*

*Ensure that facilities are available when sessions are organised encourage better interactions and relations between the MSc and BSc students from the outset. Encourage more departmental interaction between the stages. If you are not a member of the society (personally I am not interested in pub crawls and dressing up) you don't get any contact with other year groups; More communication of what exactly is expected. Outline what support is available and how to tap into it. Greater pre-course info on what you will need to buy - for example an expensive recording device, mics, stands etc - that was a shock. Better book list information - they are expensive! we need to plan!*

*The essay writing and using computer facilities need to be introduced much, much earlier in the term, as we had already started to write our essay but the time the talk was announced. Also we need to use the library from the first week so a thorough and early introduction would be beneficial.*

*In the first week of term all modules had an induction session, which I feel, should not have taken up the whole first session. By the end of the term the course felt very rushed so these wasted first weeks could perhaps be used more effectively.*

*You could have a better introduction for all of the girls to get to know each other.*

## **Conclusions**

Generally speaking, the SLS standard and extended inductions did provide opportunities for staff and students to meet and break the Ice; There were opportunities for students to get to know university and SLS facilities; Students were given course introductions; Students seem to have appreciated these induction activities while at the same time raising some issues that may help to improve the experience for the next intake of students such as: the timing, duration and relevancy of some elements which are outlined in their comments above.

The purposes of the standard and extended induction activities were primarily introductory, academic, technical and perhaps geographical in nature, that is, they aimed to improve students' skills in essay writing, computing, using library facilities, but also more literally in helping them to find their way around the campus. Judging by the data, the students seemed to find these activities superficially helpful and useful in academic, technical and geographical terms. It may be the case that the timing of these activities and their duration may be crucial factors in determining whether they are successful or not. It is not clear, for instance, whether their 'one-off' nature may have detracted from their usefulness. Perhaps a more sustained approach may result in deeper acquisition of these skills. Whether and to

what extent the actual formal academic aims of the induction activities were met is uncertain. Student comments seem to suggest that while they were useful, much of what was learned during these activities was of a superficial nature and quickly forgotten. There is an impression that what was learned would have to be learned again subsequently anyway and perhaps more deeply assimilated later when it is really necessary and useful.

A primary concern for students is the social aspects of university life, that is, fitting in, making friends and developing a sense of belonging. The induction activities may have met some of these more fundamental student concerns. Students made a number of comments that suggest they value any opportunities to meet their tutors and course mates. Some students seemed to express disappointment, for instance, at the brevity of meetings and the lack of interaction they had with their tutors and course mates. This may be particularly more salient for those students living off campus i.e. living at home rather than in Hall's of residence. Recognising the faces of staff and students may go a long way to helping students settle down. Looking at some of the comments about subsequent meetings with tutors, for instance, it seems that some students still had not developed a growing sense of ease in the company of their course mates.

A secondary concern for students may be geographical in nature i.e. exploring and discovering their new environment. Again, the guided tours of facilities may have had the additional impact of allowing students to familiarise themselves with their new surroundings and key locations within that environment such as the Library, lecture Halls, Student Union, Computing facilities etc. Being able to find ones way around must to some extent help students to settle down and feel more comfortable. Familiarising the students with their course of study seems to have been useful too although the timing and usefulness of the introduction to Clinical Education raised some negative comments. Nevertheless, there were still some positive comments about the course introduction and the introduction to the Clinical Education aspect of the course. These may have allayed some of the students' anxieties and concerns about the course itself.

The Speech and Language induction programme is somewhat different when considered in relation to the other case studies. Students for the Speech and Language Degree are drawn from a range of schools and colleges internal and external to the UK. The DPD suggested that the opportunity for outreach work in schools and colleges, which forms a major component of the Partners Programme, was unfeasible given the restrictions on student numbers for the SLS degree. The focus of the Speech and Language transition programme is on students at the point of entry to Newcastle University during induction week and at key points later in the first Semester.

The Staff in Speech and Language do not appear to have the same opportunities as staff in Chemistry, Student Recruitment and Animal Science, to get to know their students over an extended period of time prior to their actual engagement on the course itself. Chemistry, for instance, is engaged in a great deal of Outreach work with local schools to encourage

students to consider a career in Chemistry. The Partners programme, likewise, engages with students while they are still at school or college. Once they have been offered a place at Newcastle University, students are expected to attend a compulsory programme of pre-university course activities that in a sense primes them for their university studies. There are clearly more opportunities for staff in chemistry, Student Recruitment and Animal Science to get to know their students' strengths and weaknesses and to remedy any weaknesses before they start attending their degree course than staff in Speech and Language who have to meet their students at the point of access during induction week itself. This may result in different experiences for both SLS staff and students when compared with those staff and students who were engaged on the Partners programme, the Chemistry Outreach programme and Animal Science. These latter students have the opportunity to meet other students on their courses and 'break the Ice' well before they actually commence their studies. They also have the opportunity to discover the various services offered by the University prior to the commencement of their courses. In a sense, these students may already be one or more steps ahead of their SLS counterparts. They may, consequently, settle more quickly than their SLS peers. The social aspects of their move to university i.e. making friends etc, have already been taken care of and this may help them settle more quickly into their studies. Speech and Language Students by contrast still have this work to do on their arrival and at subsequent points during the first semester.

### **What makes a difference**

- Creating opportunities for staff and students to meet and get to know one another.
- Creating opportunities for students to familiarise themselves with their new environment.
- Providing course outlines and expectations
- Opportunities for personal contact with tutors on a group and individual basis throughout the first semester and perhaps at strategic points such as revision and exam periods.
- Students appreciate and value a supportive environment. This may require more personal contact from tutors.
- Suitable timing of the induction activities is crucial. Some students seemed torn between Freshers' week activities and SLS induction Activities. With so much going on during Freshers' week, it may be more effective to move the standard elements of the SLS induction to the week after, allowing students to focus exclusively on Fresher week activities. They may then be more receptive to the course induction activities.